

BABA YAGA: THE CYRILLIC WITCH AND

LOCKLESS IN LIFE: TWO LIBRETTI

by

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ABSTRACT

The translation of libretto is “little book,” and it is just that – a condensation of a drama in verse upon which is grafted musical embellishment which enriches the text for public consumption by magnifying its emotional high points. Yet the librettist, once championed as a poet of skill and insight, has become reduced to a figure who exists solely to fuel the ego and inspiration of his composer.

The development of a musical production, however, is first and foremost collaborative. The librettist deals in characterization, plotting, and declamatory poetry while the composer provides evocative emotional ambience to the mix which readily enables the transportative powers of the plot for an audience. One element of the production does not succeed without the other. A librettist has the difficult job of creating an open form drama which must perfectly suggest musical ornamentation to complete its subtle sentiments; he must craft a sturdy dramatic shell to house and hold an animating, musical force.

My own attempts in this genre are twofold – a traditional operetta and a modern operetta. Baba Yaga: The Cyrillic Witch adapts the lore surrounding the Russian ogress into an investigation of the human need for belonging by humanizing her and investigating her sense of isolation. The text is dark and brooding with a well-structured plot and uplifting ending (the hallmarks of traditional operetta). Lockless in Life is more modern in that it abandons strict plotting in favor of a psychomachian story: a man

battles internally for understanding of his place in life, his id, ego, and superego juxtaposing their sentiments in multiple vignettes in order to bring about insight. (This idea of juxtaposition of components stems from the structure of the modern combination novel, in which a number of short stories combine to reveal a larger truth or an overarching story.)

The differences between these libretti demonstrate the flexibility of the libretto as a literary genre. The “little book” can condense complex concepts such as societal rejection and personal paranoia into simplistic constructs that can be instantly identified by audiences, particularly once these constructs have been modified by music.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The text of a musical is seldom considered when audience members fold their programs and exit en masse at the close of an evening's entertainment. Talk amongst the homeward-bound patrons of the arts might mention memorable acting, focus upon especially catchy melodies, or recall particularly moving scenes, but the words spoken or sung on the stage are left as so many ghosts in the night. It should be remembered that without the words, there can be no inspiration for the music or any set-up for stage-spectacle. The words tell the story and bolster the action of a musical drama, and they possess a collective name: Libretto. My pursuits both scholarly and creative have dealt with the evocative power of the texts of musicals, examining their ability to inspire grander development of their contents through the collaboration of disparate creative mediums. I have discovered that the libretto is an art in its own right with unique elements and a rich history, and this process of discovery has caused me to develop a deep personal relationship with the genre. Indeed, I have crafted numerous libretti of my own, the most recent and demonstrative being showcased in this dissertation. What follows is a presentation of the literary libretto, its definition, its heritage, and a discussion of the ways in which I've lived with and worked within the form.

The Libretto Defined

A libretto (literally a “little book”) is the text of an opera, oratorio, or musical drama, generally containing a synopsis of scenes, cast list, stage directions, and poetic lines to be sung or *versi virgolati* (unsung text) to be performed (Randel 445). It may be original, but it’s usually based upon drama (ballets or plays), literary fiction (short stories or novels), or poetry (mostly extended cycles). The libretti resulting from adaptations are highly condensed, emotionally exaggerated versions of the originals, allowing for further enhancement of themes through musical settings of the text by a composer (446). A libretto is written with enhancement in mind; it is not a “completed” form of art since all finalizations of its content are not possible until music and stagecraft have been added which embellish the most emotionally and visually evocative moments of the text.

According to Aaron Frankel, there are six sub-genres of the libretto: the Broadway opera libretto (or “popperetta” libretto), the musical comedy libretto, the musical drama libretto, the opera libretto (itself divided into ballad opera, opera seria, opera buffa, and grand opera), the operetta libretto (“new” and “traditional” mini-operas), the play-with-music libretto, and the revue libretto (1). The play-with-music libretto and the revue libretto are contrary extremes, the former being a verse play not intended to be sung and the latter being a series of songs with no plot (the idea is to link tunes loosely by emotion rather than strictly by narrative) (1-2). Musical comedy and musical drama libretti are story-bound scripts which use short, choppy rhythmic speech or elongated vowel constructions with frequent extended pauses to conjure their respective emotions

(humor and intensity); they feature prose dialogue alternating with verse arias (2-3).

The opera libretto is a narrative-heavy text that is meant to be sung in its entirety, featuring *recitative* (dialogue to be sung between arias) and an exploration of the “grand” emotions (e.g., love, hate, jealousy, loyalty, etc.); the contemporary answer to the opera libretto is the Broadway opera libretto, which uses contemporary diction and rock-and-roll rhythms to evoke its emotions rather than the traditional verse forms of most opera libretti (Frankel 3). Less common now than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is the operetta (literally “little opera”) libretto, dealing with highly convoluted plots featuring exotic locales, hyperbolic characters, and excessive sentimentality in tightly-controlled verse; it is the precursor to musical comedy/drama libretti in that it uses prose dialogue between arias, but its language is always arch (Jones 31-9). The operetta libretto sub-genre, however, has been recently transformed into a form termed “new” operetta in which characters are three-dimensional and the element of exoticism stems from psychological investigation into character psyches rather than foreign cultures. “New” operetta libretti also prefer to deal with the here-and-now, favoring contemporary social concerns and using vernacular speech.

The Libretto As Art

The libretto, with its purposefully simple plots, roundish-but-not-rounded characters, and serviceable rather than lyric verse, is often snubbed in favor of more readily dynamic genres of writing (Gioia 67). The customary argument against the form

reasons that since a libretto must depend upon a composer and stage technicians to realize its artistic vision, it is creatively weak; true written art requires no bolster from other creative mediums to lend it viability (the term “creative mediums” here excludes the more clinical involvement of agents, editors, marketers, and publishers). However, this reasoned disregard for the libretto makes the mistake of judging the text as a single-creator work (as novels, stories, poems, and plays are generally regarded) when it is really a multi-perspective, collaborative effort.

Certainly, the libretto did not begin its career laboring beneath the onus of marginalization. The craft of libretto-writing may be traced back to the Greek festivals (particularly those of Dionysus) in which actors in plays delivered dactylic hexameter lines in a declamatory monodic fashion which was written by playwrights to align with the accompaniment of flutes and strings (Davies 22). The music was designed to embellish the poetry of a script, and those words which evoked the best emotions were showcased with florid musical ornamentation to lend them even greater emphasis. The melodic flow of speech and its potential for scoring was as much a concern for the scriptwriter as was his use of theatrical conventions. Indeed, Greek audiences expected interwoven song and speech.

The Romans downplayed libretti in favor of more decadent and violent plays, and the practice of writing non-liturgical dramatic texts to be sung for entertainment purposes was lost during the Middle Ages, but a small group of Florentines took it upon themselves to revive the discipline. In 1587, the Florentine Camerata was born under the

leadership of Count Giovanni de'Bardi; its purpose was to create and perform libretti after the Greek fashion (Gioia 67). Public response to their offerings was overwhelming, sparking the birth of Italian opera, and the scores created for the new libretti (catchy and upbeat) captured the emotional themes of the texts far more simply than the ornate verse which had first been used to conjure said moods. By the time of Rossini, the words of texts-to-be-sung had become subordinate to their evocative settings, and musical theatre patrons enjoined composers to produce ever more ornate and uplifting orchestrations (69).

The trend toward placing words beneath music continued well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with composers claiming primacy in the creation of musical dramas as their librettists toiled in obscurity to produce lines of verse on demand which might satisfy their composers' musical insights into the dramatic subtexts of carefully-chosen plots (Smith x). Critical attitudes reinforced this promulgation of unequal partnerships by lauding music as the irrefutable bastion for musical drama, capable of stirring the emotions far more quickly and deeply than mere wordplay (Kerman 22, 25).

It would seem that, as popular philosophy would have it, a collaboration between two or more disparate mediums results in one medium dominating the other; in this case, music apparently overwhelms the libretto (Gioia 68). Yet a closer examination reveals that musical supremacy pertaining to sung theatre is really only wishful thinking on the part of music critics. The librettist didn't collapse when the public shouted for melody – he adapted. The growing popularity of music over words forced him to rely upon his

dramaturgic ability more than his versification skills in order to make a more effective contribution to the shows he created (Smith xi). Verse became simple, concise, and narrative, designed to ease along the pacing of a well-reasoned plot which featured ample opportunities for spectacle (xii-xiii).

Librettists developed texts which were more streamlined and stageworthy, granting their composers more dramatic space upon which to impose scoring and more material from which to take inspiration. Consider Patrick J. Smith's definition of a librettist:

[He is] an artist who, by dint of his professional training as a poet and/or dramatist, can often visualize the work [at hand] as a totality more accurately than the composer. This totality includes not only the 'story' but also the means by which the story will be most effectively presented on stage both organizationally and scenically. (xi)

Story sensibility and stagecraft have taken the place of excessive poetic declamation in the librettist's toolkit, and he has acquired a stronger role in the composer-librettist partnership dynamic as a result. If composers continue to overshadow their wordsmiths, it's only because they are generally more recognizable individually in terms of historical influence (many writing separate melodies, suites, and symphonies which reach an audience far larger than the theatre-going crowd) while librettists work best in the background as shapers and guiders of dramatic ideas (x).

To illustrate the power that a librettist has in crafting the form of a show, the differences between La Favola d'Orfeo (1607) and Orfeo ed Eurydice (1762) should be explained. Both shows recount the tragedy of Orpheus, but their libretti cause them to

develop along highly different paths. In La Favola d'Orfeo, Alessandro Striggio provides composer Claudio Monteverdi with an impulsive but dispassionate Orpheus, resulting in a text with few flights of fancy and multiple incidences of commentary which the composer sets as ever-flowing and intensifying *recitative* that ultimately explodes into vibrant nothingness in the moment Orpheus completes his fruitless quest (Kerman 29-31, 33-4). Ranieri di Calzabigi's Orfeo ed Eurydice for Christoph Willibald von Gluck, however, features a less impulsive and more emotional Orpheus who vents his feelings freely through sweeping arias richly set by Gluck; the hero is even carried away on strains of majestic music when the piece closes (42).

Modern librettists have yet another component with which to create their libretti – the psychological archetype. For an explanation of why this should be so, one must turn to the words of noted librettist and scholar Robertson Davies:

Jung's collective unconscious deals with the idea that genetically-derived instincts respond to specific sensory stimuli in predictable patterns across the breadth of humanity. Certain sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and tactile sensations evoke the same or similar understandings for all persons. These evocative sensations are known as archetypes, and they are the staple of the libretto. What is experienced in the [musical] theatre is an appeal to basic human nature as derived from biological evolution. (203-4)

Of course, the idea of the collective unconscious being a component of humanity's biological evolution is still unproven to science's satisfaction (indeed, it has been called a purely cultural phenomenon), but Davies' connection of the two provides a useful rubric to follow when considering artistic creation. The libretto evokes emotions through verse, story, and stagecraft which reference myth and archetype in order to cater to the primal

understandings of mankind. As W. H. Auden notes, the show evoked by a libretto makes the province of the supernatural the province of the human, portraying the realm of the unconscious onstage so that its passions may be felt and examined offstage (Mendelson xv).

The art of the libretto is the art of the incomplete shape; it is a performative vessel waiting to be filled by music and mechanics. A librettist must write lyrical narrative lines which resonate with potential music, heavy with open vowels and loaded with repetitions of emotional context; he must develop a layered but straightforward story with archetypal resonance that may be realized through his understanding of stagecraft; he must telegraph all character motivations in order to transform subjectivity into a palatable form of understanding for an audience. The result is a slender volume usually less than one hundred pages in length which explodes into raw vitality when presented upon a stage. It is this transformative quality of the libretto which has attracted the attention of such modern-day creative writers as Truman Capote (House of Flowers), Dana Gioia (Nosferatu), and Joyce Carol Oates (Black Water).

The Genre Less Taken

The appeal of the libretto for me as a writer stems from my lifelong fascination with musical theatre. In Primary School, I was called upon to participate in a Spring Solstice pageant entitled The Fall of Freezing Breeze. I was dressed in shiny blue

leotards with grey fabric icicles sewn on as piping and set to play the title role of the evil North Wind who confronts Mary Sunshine in a final bid to prevent spring from arriving. Naturally, Freezing Breeze was unsuccessful in thwarting his nemesis during that performance, but he certainly conquered me with his minor-key mini-aria: “I’ll blow my cold as I have of old/And Mary Sunshine’s who I’ll scold/Until I see her beg and plead/To leave the world to Freezing Breeze.” Admittedly, this isn’t great poetry, but it is dramatic and character-driven, and I could feel the story unfolding about me as the music swelled and the little woodland creatures (particularly the five-year-olds wearing robin’s-head masks) cowered at my stockinged feet.

I spent the rest of Primary School participating in more pageants when I was able (farmers, peasants, trees, wizards – I played anyone), and I even wrote my own libretti for thirty-minute musical adaptations of Rumpelstiltskin and Little Red Riding Hood which were performed (with costumes and pre-recorded classical music as a template for the lyrics) before all the grade levels before I left for Secondary School. At the age of eleven, just prior to my departure into the upper grades, I discovered Richard Wagner in the local library’s record stacks. A stunning rendering in glowing acrylics of a Norse woman, plump in her armor and bristling with spears, prompted me to borrow the record (Die Valküre, of course), and I was charmed by the majestic darkness of the piece, but I was stimulated moreso by the moving story of Siegmund provided in English as an album jacket insert. His love was powerful enough to deny death. I wanted to uncover more stories with such immense emotional scope made palpable by lavishly textured arias

and *leitmotifs*.

Initially, I believed that the music was more important than the words/plot concepts (which opinion I garnered from reading some critical essays), so I listened to the compositions of Mozart, Gluck, Verdi, Rossini, and their ilk dutifully until I fathomed that I was actually more keen on the stories behind the tunes than the tunes themselves. I retraced my steps and reexamined the operas of the Masters, this time focusing upon the names in tinier print which were credited with writing the libretti – Da Ponte, Calzabigi, Hofmannsthal, Maeterlinck, Shikaneder. Close study of their words and stage directions reminded me of my first stage experiences as *Freezing Breeze* – scenarios were crafted to achieve maximum emotional resonance both for performers and audience members, a resonance which was to be embellished by musical scoring.

My undergraduate years saw me pursuing my fascination with this open-ended stage-bound storytelling by mixing into my English major with secondary tracks in Music Composition and Playwriting. I was curious to discover exactly what techniques I could develop in order to create my own libretti and, by extension, my own shows. My participation in numerous Broadway-style musicals opened up the idea of the less “grand” musical to me, acquainting me more fully with the historic pairings of Kander and Ebb, Rodgers and Hart (and later Hammerstein), the Gershwins, and Lerner and Loewe. Libretti, I discovered, could be written to incorporate dance and whimsy as well as to conjure emotional saturation. I decided to blend the freewheeling spirit of Broadway with the intensity of opera for my first attempt at a complete libretto: Curses: A Midsummer

Night's Peeve. The text features a dysfunctional band of witches and wizards attempting to lift the curse on the kingdom of Ildrecht. It's good silly fun, but the arias are more slapstick than sublime and the stagecraft offerings are highly tentative. In short, Curses is the libretto of an apprentice, and its weakness in terms of emotional depth is obvious.

I spent the next few years honing my understanding of the relationship between music and words in a dramatic setting. I worked as a professional storyteller, spinning tales with musical accompaniment for schools and festivals; I provided underscorings for the National Conference of Community and Justice's anti-bigotry skitworks; I served as a transcriber for the Beth-El Players; also, I wrote lyrics and music for fairy tale shows presented by the Sheldon Vexler Children's Theatre (which remains one of my jobs today). I continued my literary studies as well, and I put my newfound understanding of the word-music interplay into action with Beowulf: A Roaring Twenties Epic, my Master's Thesis at Incarnate Word College (in conjunction with St. Mary's College and Our Lady of the Lake University). This piece is more passionate than Curses, dealing primarily with a power play between Beowulf and Grendel which is set through gritty commentary and brooding music presented by the storytelling Barber Scop Quartet. I may have overcompensated in my attempt to eliminate the silliness of my earlier dramatic attempt as the libretto becomes emotionally weighty before Beowulf's death.

Still, I continue to learn, and my interactions with Ken and Tammy Frazier (playwrights) at the Sheldon Vexler Theatre have proven to me that collaboration is an invaluable element in crafting a potent libretto. Collaboration. All of my studies taught

me that this was a dirty word. The advice offered by my instructors was that the artist should create alone in his garret, struggling with his Muse in the best Bohemian fashion in order to force out something innovative and individual. Yet collaboration releases a creative synergy, yielding a complementary artwork which thrives on its contrasts of perspective (Gioia 75). With the libretto, which combines stagecraft awareness, poetic flexibility, and musical insight, collaboration is a necessity which cannot be denied. As I've learned from my solo efforts, the unaided mind of a librettist tends to produce dramatic extremes.

An Ogress to Admire

One of the most untapped resources for libretti inspiration is the loaded vein of Russian folklore. Italy, England, France, Germany, and even the United States have dominated the musical stage with their own stories, ignoring the mystic allure of the eastern tales. Why this should be so perplexes me. As a child, I delved into detailed picturebooks which described and depicted fearless Tsareviches overcoming brutal ogres and ogresses, all set against a backdrop of wild forests and unforgiving *steppes*. Folkloric Russia is a place of emotional extremes – prime fodder for an emotion-conscious libretto.

Bearing this in mind, I decided to embrace a Russian source for my newest libretto. I originally examined the *bylina* tales of warrior-legends, but I abandoned these stories for the supernatural variety found in the *skazka* and *bylichka* stories (dealing with mortals who interact with representatives from the world of the dead or the land of the

gods) (Warner 130). I chose to use a traditional operetta form for my text so that I might treat the material as wholly exotic and dabble without fear in melodrama, for Russian tales are highly excited and impulsive affairs with all-too-sudden shifts in intensity and plotting. However, I needed a central figure around which to craft my text, an icon for the brooding geographies and sentiments iterated by the stories I had read. The mercurial Tsar Saltan had potential, and Koschei the Deathless was delightfully vampiric, but I finally resolved to use the ogress Baba Yaga.

Who is Baba Yaga? This is a question I've encountered numerous times as I've worked on this project, but I never expected it to be raised because Baba Yaga is so huge and obvious a part of Russian culture (much like the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy in Western cultures). Also known as Jezi-Baba or Bobe Ha, Baba Yaga (which translates roughly into "witch grandmother") is a crone or ogress who lives in a hut on fowl's feet deep within an enchanted forest; she possesses great wisdom (being a diluted form of the pagan Russians' goddess of knowledge and death) and she can act for both good or evil, although she usually chooses evil (Warner 85). Most folklorists brand her a gatekeeper, a figure caught between life and death who guards the portal between the two worlds (85).

My trouble was to make this dark figure and her archetypal world accessible to a modern (and largely Western) audience. After reading hundreds of stories about the witch, I came to believe that a frame of familiarity would be necessary if there was to be any appreciable degree of audience comprehension for the eastern motifs. I used as the core of my libretto the tale of Vasilisa the Beautiful, in which the heroine is abused by her

evil stepmother but eventually triumphs through the supernatural assistance of Baba Yaga. This is essentially the Russian version of Cinderella, and recognition of that tale's elements, I reasoned, would help an audience regard the piece in a more friendly light – an old friend in new clothing.

I also adopted many of the lighthearted, pop-culture-referencing techniques set forth in the modern *Märchenopers* (fairy tale musicals) by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine (Into the Woods) and by the Disney musicals-by-committee (Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King). I preserved the concept of evil being vanquished by good without the force for good descending into evil itself (there is no satisfaction in the form without this convention). I also used the stylings of vernacular speech rather than inverted Russian syntax, flavoring the language with occasional Cyrillic offerings which were defined in context to avoid confusion. I took pains to humanize the main characters instead of hyperbolizing them. Vasilisa is a rebellious teenaged girl who is coping with the death of her mother; Sorcha is resentful of her stepdaughter because the girl reminds her of her all-too-perfect dead sister; Baba Yaga is a brooding figure who is portrayed as embracing evil due to psychological damage she received in her youth. Every main character has a considered backstory and reasonable motivations for his or her actions.

Another method I made use of was to make many references to contemporary social idioms, providing opportunities for in-jokes (for example, Baba Yaga's demonstrations of Tourette's Syndrome, and the sibling rivalry of her servants). Finally, I incorporated a post-modern sensibility into the piece by presenting a play-within-a-play-

within-a-play. Gypsies tell the story of Vasilisa by playing it out, but they are also aware of and interactive with the audience which is watching them watch their own play. Mieke Bal's ironic focalization (A sees what B sees what C is doing) is in full effect.

At the core of the show is its premise – the exploration of family relationships and the characters' various methods for examining belonging. Vasilisa searches for self-resolution after her mother's death leaves her adrift in her emotions; Sorcha desires recognition from the family and the society which has shunned her; Baba Yaga searches for answers to satisfy why she lost her own family even as she erects her own surrogate family in the form of her undead minions. Even the Gypsies reiterate the theme in the form of the power play between the matriarch Melanova and her son Vertres. In the end, everyone does find belonging, whether or not it is desired (Sorcha, for example, is spirited away by Baba Yaga, who can certainly sympathize with the other woman's brooding, bitter nature). There is no escaping the draw of one's proper place in the skein of life.

The Mind of a Schmoe

Lockless in Life is an experiment for me. A recent study of mine has been the story cycle or composite novel which is, according to Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, "a literary work composed of shorter texts that – though individually complete and autonomous – are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" (2). Some high-profile examples of the genre are Anderson's

Winesburg, Ohio, Faulkner's Go Down, Moses, Cisneros' The House on Mango Street, and Hemingway's In Our Time.

To clarify Dunn and Morris' definition, story cycles feature individual stories, each possessing a unique theme and tonality, which collectively create a larger organic unit that offers insight into the preceding stories or unites their tones and themes. To venture a metaphor, story cycles might better be termed "combination novels" (as in a combination lock) since they consist of individual "tumblers" which work in concert to release a concealed "treasure." One is impossible to grasp without the other, and both may be approached from infinite perspectives by multiple readers or by a reader who returns time and again to confront the "tumblers" with new reserves of wisdom gleaned from enriching life experience. There is a sense of barely-shared space between stories and novel – a constant grappling beneath the surface of the texts which appeals to human comprehension of, and relation to, life tension.

I wondered if this separate-but-unified approach to literature could be applied to the libretto genre. Separate songs can unify according to theme, but I wanted dramatic as well as emotional unification. None of my initial attempts at the "combination libretto" worked well; they all developed linear plots, and I was growing frustrated when a conversation with one of my professors led me to reexamine the Psychomachia of Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-405 A.C.E.) which I'd worked with in an early Latin class. The piece has the Seven Deadly Sins fight the Seven Cardinal Virtues within the mind of its protagonist, with the virtues eventually banishing their fulsome counterparts.

The scenes are very French in that each pairing of opposites in battle is a separate emotional moment, but all of these moments add up to the redemption of the protagonist.

I found myself intrigued by the protagonist who had to endure this battle of the morals. What if he had been wholly aware of his internal struggles? What if he could have taken a more active role in his redemption? Would he have been able to alter anything? The concept of the self-as-champion-for-the-self developed, but I desired a more modern approach to inner conflict than that offered by Prudentius. The chief hero of the current, post-modern period is the anti-hero, the man who is his own worst enemy. Why not tell a story about this loser through various vignettes which could explore his disgruntled psyche?

In short order, Victor Lockless was born (his name a mockery of his life, for he is never victorious and he keeps himself locked into stasis). I placed the action entirely inside his head and allowed him to interact with himself at the three stages of his life (Young, Middle-Aged, and Old) which also reflect the three Freudian elements of his psyche (id, ego, superego), allowing me to explore the “new” operetta form and its psychological focus even as I experimented with the combination novel form (each song in the libretto serving as a building block for a larger organic unit after the fashion of the stories in a combination novel).

It is never clear just which Victor is actually in control of the action of the libretto, and each man has his own set of neuroses that only collectively “complete” Victor-as-man (Young Victor deals poorly with issues of homosexuality and molestation, Middle

Victor can't make choices, and Old Victor is overwhelmed by his own insignificance).

The sections may be played in any order, and a different understanding of the forces that have shaped Victor into the schmoe that he is results each time (extremes ranging from sympathy with to outright antipathy at the man for wasting his life). The individual emotional moments add up to an epiphany of worth for both Victor and the audience.

Dissertation Ruminations and Future Ambitions

Working on the libretti for my dissertation has been a labor of discovery. As with my previous projects in this medium, my results have not met completely with my expectations. Baba Yaga is accessible to a broader audience than my other libretti due to its dependence upon fairy tale sensibility and its contemporary brand of humor, but its chiaroscuro dramatic moments are not entirely balanced, sometimes leaning too deeply into the bleak and brooding aspect of situations. Some lightening of the Byronic sentiment is probably in order.

Also, the components of Lockless in Life may not be as interchangeable as I had hoped. Although shuffling the order of the songs continues to create new emotional and dramatic effects for the discerning arranger, "Awakening" and "My Apology" tend to gravitate respectively towards beginning and end positions since they are essentially a character-introduction number and an epiphanic piece. This concern, however, may have arisen due to my closeness to the libretto and my constant analysis of its contents. I won't be able to judge the efficacy of the musical's technical flexibility until Lockless in Life

has enjoyed a few performances. If directors consistently frame the show with “Awakening” and “My Apology,” I shall know that those pieces need to be made more ambiguous so that they do not demand key placement.

Yet no creative work is ever completely finished. Only constant revision guided by the hands of ever-increasing experience and readerly feedback may improve a text. The Gypsy storyteller framework which threads through Baba Yaga, for example, arose from positive feedback I received about a story in a fiction workshop which focused upon the unique customs of the Rom. One must be willing and eager to experiment with such instances of inspiration and be equally willing to fail in the attempt. “Make it new” is the rallying cry of the librettist as he works to unlock hidden depths within a text he is adapting for the musical stage, but “make it better” is the mantra which haunts him after he has set aside his pen. All of my works, from Curses through Lockless, continue to be reconsidered and revamped as I learn more about crafting an effective libretto, and I believe that this shall always be the case.

I intend for my future endeavors in this medium to be more collaborative than they have been thus far. As writer of book, music, and lyrics for most of my shows (children’s fare excepted), I feel that I have been shouldering the burdens of three persons rather than one. Certainly, my shows require years rather than months to finish, and they always appeal solely to my tastes initially. (A side-effect of working with oneself is that one tends to like whatever one produces.) I have already taken some tentative strides into the realm of interactive creation. I have written the score for an original martial arts

opera, Life of an Artist, by working closely with librettists Hannah Park and James Oh, and I've written a libretto based upon Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome which I have consciously prevented myself from scoring (a difficult task, since I tend to hear words and music together as I work). I am currently searching for a composer willing to confront the challenge of the latter piece. Whatever the fate of these artistic forays, I'm sure that collaboration is where my future lies. The tensive interplay of contrasting perspectives bent upon a common goal demands the production of a piece with popular appeal as the collaborators compromise, and a libretto with greater popular appeal is a successful (and profitable) libretto indeed.

CHAPTER II

BABA YAGA: THE CYRILLIC WITCH

AND LOCKLESS IN LIFE: TWO LIBRETTI

Part One: Baba Yaga: The Cyrillic Witch

French Words and Phrases

Ah, nos destins tristes. = Ah, our sad fates.

Avec plaisir. = With pleasure.

C'est magnifique! = It's splendid!

La Chambre De Poulet = The Chicken House

le cimetière = cemetery

Comment terrible pour nous! = How terrible for us.

les couleurs = colors

distingué = distinguished

Elle est touchée, aussi. = She's touched, too.

la grande femme = the large woman

Il est si beau! = It's so beautiful!

J'admets. = I admit.

Je crache sur vous! = I spit on you!

Je le sais meilleur. = I know it better.

l'amour = love

le loup = wolf

Lune sacrée! = Sacred moon!

la madame = older lady; mrs.

la mademoiselle = young lady; miss

mes frères = my brothers

les messieurs = gentlemen

le monde = world

Naturellement. = Naturally.

Oui. = Yes.

Quell dommage! = What loss/damage!

S'il vous plaît. = Please.

Soyez bien, mon enfant. = Be well, my child.

Vous n'avez aucun goût! = You have no taste!

Vous non-Français! = You not-French!

Spanish Words and Phrases

la abuelita = little grandmother

el amarillo = yellow

Buenas tardes, señorita. = Good afternoon, miss.

Bueno. = Good.

¡Caramba! = How strange!

los cojones = testicles

De nada. = You're welcome.

Ella es la abuela. = She's the grandmother.

En las malas mentes. = In the bad minds.

Eres tan injusto. = You're so unfair.

Es verdad. = It's the truth.

Estoy muy confuso. = I'm very confused.

la fiesta = party

Hace mucho frío. = It's very cold.

Lo sé mejor. = I know it better.

¡Maravilloso! = Wonderful!

mi amiga = my (female) friend

muchacha del partido = party girl

Ningunos. = None.

¡No haga que le lastima! = Don't make me hurt you!

Qué será será. = What will be will be.

¡Qué suerte! = What luck!

¡Retroceda! = Back down!/Back off!

el señor = sir; mister

la señora = older lady; mrs.

la siesta = nap

¡Usted no puede tocarme, feo! = You can't touch me, ugly!

Russian/Romany Words and Phrases

abyet = lunch

adin = one

Astanaavites! = Stop!

Baba-Yaga = witch-grandmother

Balshoye spasiba. = Thank you very much.

Bila ochin fkusna. = The food was excellent.

blinis = crepes

borscht = beet soup

boyar = nobleman

bubbe = grandmother (Jewish)

chitiri = four

chuvihani = witch-leader of a gypsy tribe

Da. = Yes.

Dasvidanya. = Goodbye.

dva = two

De Develeski = Earth Mother

devushka = little girl

domovoi = house goblin

dubynia = oak-man

Duvvel = God

Gazpazha. = Ma'am.

golden crown = held above a pair during their marriage; a Greek custom

gorgio/a = a non-Romany

igrushki = toys

Interesno. = It's interesting/I wonder.

jallin' a drom = traveling the road

kasha = buckwheat, barley, wheat, or millet mush

khlep = bread

kopeck = a unit of money; one hundred to a rouble

kuritsa = chicken

kvas = beer

kvetch = complain

Ladno. = It's okay.

langyet = fried steak

Mi Duvvel, dick tule opre mande. = Look down on me, God.

mommeleh = mother (very familiar)

Nyet. = No.

Pazhalsta. = Please/You're welcome.

pelmeny = beef ravioli with sour cream

piroshki = turnovers

Pochemu? = Why?

pocledniy skazka = final fairy tale

Ponuatno. = I understand.

puridai = elder matriarch

pyat = four

riba = fish

Rod = male god of the household

rouble = a unit of money; the Russian “dollar”

rozhanitsy = female goddesses of the household

shashlik = shish kebab

shishki = droppings

Shto? = What?

Shto eta? = What is this?

Spasiba. = Thank you.

steppes = plains

Stribog = god of the air

Svarozhich = god of fire

tri = three

troika = sled, sleigh

Tsar = king

Tsarevich = prince

Tsarevna = princess

Tsarina = Queen

Tutti sutti mishto. = May you sleep well. (Gypsy funeral wish)

Udachi vam! = Good luck!

vardo = covered gypsy wagon

vodka = brandy

Ya vazmu disyert. = And now for dessert.

zakuska = appetizer

Zdrastvuyte. = Hello.

[NOTE: All “v” sounds in Russian are pronounced as “w” sounds.]

Cast of Characters

Baba Yaga, ogress, witch, and nasty living legend

Babushka, a living doll

Maschaf, BABA YAGA's undead valet

Madam Melanova, *chuvihani*; a *puridai* of the Gypsies; VERTRES' mother

Morning, Noon, and Night, Avatars of Day

Anna Pelochik, a spirit; VASILISA's mother and SERGEI's first wife;
SORCHA's sister

Sergei Pelochik, VASILISA's blacksmith father; SORCHA and ANNA's husband

Sorcha Pelochik, a mediocre witch; VASILISA's stepmother/aunt; ANNA's sister

Vasilisa Pelochik, the heroine

Vertres, the Gypsy captain; MELANOVA's son

Supporting Characters

Gypsies, members of MELANOVA's tribe

Rusalka, Leshy, Wyverns, Shadow Goblins, monsters of the forest

Shades of Hirskeny Villagers

Skulls, Spiders, and Bats, victims and familiars in BABA YAGA's hut

The play and the play-within-the-play are both set in folkloric Russia during early winter, particularly in the village of Omanovik and the surrounding Forest Bledinil.

Synopsis of Scenes

PROLOGUE

Act I

Scene 1:	Forest Bledinil. Twilight.	“Fortunes”
Scene 2:	The Pelochik household. Morning.	“Far From You” “In My Day” “Good Enough”
Scene 3:	The Pelochik household. Evening.	“In My Day” (Sorcha’s Spell)
Scene 4:	Forest Bledinil.	“Lost from the Light” “Morning, Noon, and Night”
Scene 5:	Baba Yaga’s hut.	“The Dancing Hut”

ENTR’ACTE

Act II

Scene 1:	Baba Yaga’s hut. Evening.	“What to Make?” “The Bright of Our Eyes” “Leave it to Babushka”
Scene 2:	Forest Bledinil.	“Witches to Hags”
Scene 3:	Baba Yaga’s Hut. Afternoon. The Pelochik household. Baba Yaga’s Hut. Evening.	“Ask” “Your Wife, She Knows” “Stains Upon the Snow”
Scene 4:	The village of Omanovik. Forest Bledinil. Morning – Night (Multiples).	“Going Home” “Pocledniy Skazka”

(Forest Bledinil at twilight. MADAM MELANOVA's *vardo* is revealed CS, surrounded by Gypsies. The *chuvihani* herself stands to the side of the wagon; she is disgusted. VERTRES stands beside her. A solitary Rom plays a haunting, shifting melody on his violin.)

MELANOVA

(To VERTRES.) So?

VERTRES

So nothing. We're stuck.

MELANOVA

People of the road are never stilled, never stopped.

VERTRES

Save it for the *gorgios*, Momma. I know better.

(He opens out the DS wall of the *vardo*. A man-sized gauge is housed within the structure, mystical and ornate. A filagreed "E" glows at the base of the gauge. The violinist begins to squeak his violin a la "gas alarm ping.")

The wagons, the stoves, the lamps – anything and everything mystic is gasping for magic.

(MELANOVA plucks a rock from the ground and tosses it at the violinist to make him stop squeaking.)

MELANOVA

Quit that caterwauling! (He does, and she turns to VERTRES with poor grace.) Where are we, then?

VERTRES

Forest Bledinil, I think. By Omanovik.

GYPSY

Where nobody has a *kopeck* for an honest itinerant.

MELANOVA

So. Right. Think. Think. Think. Melanova knows all. Melanova sees all. (Pause, then with inspiration.) Anyone know a story about Forest Bledinil? Or Omanovik?

GYPSY VIOLINIST

What for?

SONG: FORTUNES

MELANOVA

For telling. That's how we fuel our magic, right? With stories?

VERTRES

Stories from others. That's why we wander. We can't tell our own stories.

MELANOVA

Who says so?

GYPSY

You do. Whenever you have the chance.

MELANOVA

I can unsay what I've said, no? Melanova is smart enough to be wiser than herself. Or something profound like that. Look, I'll start things. I have the perfect words to share. Vertres, we need a father. You'll do. Milavisa, I think you'd best be the heroine. Keep her plucky but humble. No airs. Yagrof, Boritch, Vledes – pick up the comic relief. Get Zedkik involved, too. You can use the sarcasm. Come on, people. Let's make some magic!

GRAB THE COSTUMING AND DAB THE PAINT.
BUILD A MERRY LITTLE FICTION.
SET YOUR FANCY FREE OF ALL RESTRAINT,
BINDING, AND CONSTRICTION.

THROW YOUR DOUBTS TO THE AIR,
RELISH THE FEELING OF PURE ABANDON.
FIND A MANTLE TO WEAR.
DANCE FOR THE ROLE YOU LAND IN!

(The tribe scatter around the stage. They find costumes and props, everything they need to become the characters for the show proper. They disguise themselves throughout the song as MELANOVA guides their efforts and whispers directions. VERTRES becomes SERGEI, a role he maintains for the remainder of the play.)

GYPSIES

FORTUNES! LET'S TELL SOME FORTUNES!
MAKE OUT A HISTORY FOR CHARACTERS TO PLAY!
FORTUNES! ROLL OUT THE FORTUNES!
CALL UP THE CAST AND GET THE PLOTTING ON ITS WAY!

VASILISA

VASILISA, YOUNG AND PLAIN,
LEADS A LIFE THAT'S HARD.
KIND OF HEART BUT TART OF TONGUE,
MOTHERLESS AND SCARRED.

SERGEI

SERGEI SAW HIS ANNA DIE
AND HE MOURNS THE LOSS.

SORCHA

SORCHA, ANNA'S SISTER,
IS HIS NEW WIFE AND HIS BOSS.

ANNA

LEAVING ANNA EDGY IN THE SPIRIT WORLD,
WORRIED FOR HER DAUGHTER AND HER MAN.

AVATARS AND MASCHAF

MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT AND MASCHAF UNITGEY
HELP VASILISA WHEN THEY CAN.

(The principals cluster together as they sing
the following counterpoint. The remaining
tribefolk, MELANOVA exempted, join the
grouping slowly.)

VASILISA

VASILISA, YOUNG
AND PLAIN,
LEADS A LIFE
THAT'S HARD.

SERGEI

SERGEI SAW
HIS ANNA DIE
AND HE MOURNS
THE LOSS.

ANNA

LEAVING ANNA
EDGY IN THE
SPIRIT WORLD,
WORRIED FOR
HER DAUGHTER

KIND OF HEART
BUT TART OF TONGUE,
MOTHERLESS
AND SCARRED.

AND HER MAN.

SORCHA

AVATARS/MASCHAF

SORCHA, ANNA'S
SISTER, IS HIS
NEW WIFE AND
HIS BOSS.

MORNING, NOON,
AND NIGHT AND
MASCHAF
UNITGEY HELP
VASILISA WHEN
THEY CAN.

GYPSIES

BABA YAGA!
BABA YAGA!
BABA YAGA!
BABA YAGA!

ALL

BABA YAGA!
BABA YAGA!
BABA YAGA!
BABA YAGA!
BABA YAGA!

(MELANOVA gestures and BABA YAGA bursts out of the group. She is plump and grandmotherly in physicality, the morphic opposite of her traditional emaciated appearance, but she moves with menace and a sense of total control. This is a very real woman who has gone to the bad and prospered there. The Gypsies are aghast, for this is clearly no Rom in disguise. BABA YAGA menaces VASILISA and the audience and then storms offstage. SERGEI/ VERTRES looks askance at MELANOVA, but she only shrugs. A silhouette of the hut on fowl's legs is flashed on a back-scrim. Upon which a tiny BABA YAGA can be seen flying home.)

ALL

WE'VE PREPARED THE FORTUNES, THE SCARY FORTUNES
FOR A STORY MORE THAN PASSING GRIM!
FORTUNES! WE'VE WRIT THE FORTUNES!
NOW'S THE TIME THE STORY SHOULD BEGIN!

(Blackout.)

END OF ACT I, SCENE 1

(A spotlight shines on MORNING, who gestures. Lights rise to reveal the Gypsy players seated in a loose ring around CS. MORNING sits with the avatars. The wagon has been moved US; its gauge, starting to fill, is now DSL. A table with several stools occupies the playing space – the area within the ring. This table/stool arrangement always suggests the Pelochik household. The Gypsy ring is lit lightly throughout the show. Only the playing space has major lighting shifts such as blackouts. VASILISA sits at the table. MELANOVA speaks an aside.)

SONG: FAR FROM YOU

MELANOVA

Vasilisa Pelochik is no stranger to sadness. Her mother dead from fever; her father married to her aunt. It's a regular soap *skazka*, yes? But she doesn't sink beneath the pressure. Not our girl. (She sits in the ring.) Not much.

VASILISA

THE FROST HAS FALLEN EARLY.
THE SKY HAS GONE TO GREY.
I FEEL A CHILL WIND BLOWING,
BLOWING ILL FROM FAR AWAY.

HOW LIKE YOUR DAY OF DYING.
THE WEATHER WAS THE SAME.
DEAR MOMMA, HOW I MISS YOU,
HOW YOU USED TO SAY MY NAME.

FAR FROM YOU.
FAR FROM THE LIFE WE KNEW.
WE STAND
ON GREY AND BARREN GROUND.

FAR FROM YOU.
 HOW FAR AWAY YOU FLEW.
 OUR DAYS ARE SORROW
 RAGING RAW AND UNBOUND.

MAYBE GOD HAD SOME GRAND PURPOSE
 WHEN HE LAID YOU IN THE DUST.
 I KNOW YOU WOULD NOT DESERT US,
 NEVER BREAK A DAUGHTER'S TRUST,
 BUT WE'RE IN NEED AND WE'RE IN PAIN
 AND YOUR CHAIR IS DARK AND COLD.
 A GIRL WITHOUT A MOTHER
 IS A FROZEN STONE, A WINTER STONE.
 A GIRL WITHOUT HER MOTHER
 IS A FROZEN WINTER STONE.

THE HOUSE IS LONELY LATE AT NIGHT.
 THE SHADOWS CRAWL; THE SHADOWS CREEP.
 YOU MADE THE PLACE FEEL SAFE AND WARM.
 YOU GUIDED DREAMS. YOU GUARDED SLEEP.

DUSTY CORNERS BY THE STAIRS
 MARK WHERE YOU WOULD SIT AND SEW.
 YOUR PRESENCE WAS A WATCHLIGHT,
 AND NOW WE DON'T KNOW WHERE TO GO.

FAR FROM YOU.
 FAR FROM THE LIFE WE KNEW.
 WE STAND
 ON GREY AND BARREN GROUND.
 FAR FROM YOU.
 HOW FAR AWAY YOU FLEW.
 OUR DAYS ARE SORROW
 THAT FLOWS UNBOUND.

(VASILISA contemplates in
 silence. MELANOVA, still seated, speaks
 an aside.)

MELANOVA

But Vasilisa could still reach her mother, after a fashion. (A cough is heard from the audience.) Hey, you should trust me on this. I read palms. I know things. I know what *you're* doing later, and you should lower your ears and be ashamed. (Beat.) Anyway. A gift of living love was left for the girl – a doll she named Babushka. (VASILISA reaches into her apron and produces the doll.) Such a blessing. (VASILISA animates the doll as a puppet.) And such a surprise.

BABUSHKA

(Always in ANNA's voice unless otherwise noted.) Vasi! Would you stop with the heartfelt lamenting already? She was my mother, too, but am I always pushing on the heart pump? *Nyet*. I'm not. Not that I have a heart, really, but that little ball of string just under the chin can really knot up.

VASILISA

You don't understand.

BABUSHKA

Spasiba for the obvious. You still have your poppa. You still have your health. You still have your looks. (Beat.) Best two out of three?

VASILISA

This is your cheer-up?

BABUSHKA

So you're plain. Tough *shishki*! It's like your momma always said:

BABUSHKA AND VASILISA

"A kind hand beats a pretty face."

BABUSHKA

Not literally, of course. That would just be weird.

VASILISA

(Beat.) But Momma *was* beautiful.

BABUSHKA

And you're hardly a woman yet. Let things develop. Who knows what could crop up.

VASILISA

(She shakes the doll.) Stop saying two things at once. I hate that!

BABUSHKA

You're telling me! (The shaking stops.) Gai! You try to shine a little hope . . .

SORCHA

(From offstage.) Vasilisa! Who are you talking to in there?

BABUSHKA

(In VASILISA's voice.) It's the Tsar. He wants to give you a medal for growing a nose bigger than a five pound sausage.

SORCHA

(From offstage.) What!

VASILISA

(Whispered to BABUSHKA.) I never said that!

BABUSHKA

You were thinking it. Don't deny. I have this quasi-motherly vibe thing going.

VASILISA

(As SORCHA's footsteps approach.) We'll discuss that later. Get in the apron.

BABUSHKA

No way. I have some words for that flat-faced ogress you call step-momma. Or is it aunt? The whole situation is pretty confusing. (Beat.) Make that ugly confusing.

VASILISA

In the apron, or I rip your arm off.

BABUSHKA

You can be *such* a naughty girl.

VASILISA

(SORCHA has nearly arrived.) *Pazhalsta?* She's already ruined everything else.

BABUSHKA

(She sighs.) Fine. But she could do with some inventive cursing.

VASILISA

Maybe. (She stuffs BABUSHKA into the apron, causing muffled protests.) But not now.

(SORCHA, a warty, misshapen woman, enters, presumably from the kitchen. She gnaws indelicately on a chicken bone.)

SORCHA

Shto eta? What's this with you calling me a sausage?

VASILISA

Not you. (Trying for a save.) Just your nose.

SORCHA

The rest of me's not worth a joke, then? You have to pick at body parts like a starving crow?

BABUSHKA

(In VASILISA's voice, still muffled.) No crow would go near that body. There's a difference between dead and undead.

(VASILISA slaps her apron pocket, but the damage has already been done.)

SORCHA

(Coldly.) So. We have had this little talk. We have had it alone. We have had it with Sergei. (She gnaws the last meat off the bone, chews and swallows it, and then licks her fingers clean.) You should show your momma more respect.

VASILISA

You're not my mother, Sorcha.

SORCHA

That's right. I'm better.

VASILISA

(Seething.) Hardly. Nobody liked you, Sorch. They still don't like you. You're too bent up into yourself. You know what the women call you? *Rusalka* – the drowned one who walks. You're the sister who should have died!

(Two beats pass as the two women glare at each other across a thick tension.)

SORCHA

I'm still your father's wife. For *always* now, since I swore beneath the crown and canopy. You are his, and you are *mine*. (She throws her bone offstage from whence she came.) Go clean the kitchen. There's chicken all over.

VASILISA

(Turning to leave.) I need to ask Poppa something first.

SONG: IN MY DAY

SORCHA

(She drags VASILISA around.) What you *need* is to fill a tub and get scrubbing! A girl's duty is to obey her mother, first or second or third. There is no asking Poppa. (She spits.) What are you, a Tsarevna?

IN MY DAY,
GIRLS NEVER QUESTIONED WHAT AN ELDER SAID.
THEY WERE RAISED
TO MIND CHORES AND ALWAYS KEEP THE FAMILY FED.
THEY DIDN'T BACK-TALK;
THEY DIDN'T SASS.
WHATEVER THEY WERE TOLD TO DO,
IT CAME TO PASS.

BUT WHAT DO YOU CARE
WITH YOUR BRAZEN WAYS?
GIVE ME BACK THE GIRLS

WE HAD BACK IN MY DAY.

I ASK YOU TO CLEAN
AND YOU TREAT ME MEAN.
ALL YOU DO IS GROAN AND MOAN.
I WAS INSANE,
INFLAMED IN THE BRAIN,
TO MARRY INTO THIS HOUSEHOLD.

VASILISA

IN YOUR DAY,
YOU ALWAYS HID UNTIL THE WORK WAS DONE.
YOU WOULD MOCK
SISTER, MOMMA, POPPA, COUSIN – ANYONE!
YOU WERE MEAN AND STINGY,
LAZY, DIRTY, RUDE,
AND THE YEARS HAVE ONLY
WORSENERD UP YOUR ATTITUDE.
THAT YOU'D MEET A SUDDEN END,
IS WHAT THE NEIGHBORS PRAYED.
THAT'S THE KIND OF GIRL
YOU WERE BACK IN YOUR DAY.

SORCHA

BECAUSE OF YOU
I'M RAGGED, RATTY, WORN, AND FRAYED.
ALL I AM IS TRAPPED
INSIDE THE LIFE OF WIFE AND SLAVE,
BUT I HAVE A CORE OF STRENGTH
THAT'S NESTED DEEP IN PRIDE.
I WON'T REST UNTIL I'M SURE
WE'RE BOTH DISSATISFIED.
I PROMISE YOU, DEAR VASI,
THAT YOU'LL NO MORE GET YOUR WAY,
AND YOU'LL LEARN THE WICKED TRICKINESS;
THE UNBRIDLED MALICIOUSNESS;
THE DEEP, DEPRAVED VINDICTIVENESS

OF A WOMAN OF MY DAY!

(SORCHA points to the kitchen. VASILISA, eyes never leaving SORCHA, backs offstage. SORCHA fumes. ANNA's voice, magnified from a great distance, rings into the room. She sighs like a wintry wind before addressing her still-living sister. Throughout the sisters' interchange, ANNA's voice should fade in and out of various locations around the theatre. If technology is lacking for this fading, she can physically confront and "haunt" SORCHA.)

ANNA

I've seen bear cubs get more tenderness. Some softness would be easier on the family.

SORCHA

I'll crack like ice first.

ANNA

That's nothing to be proud about.

SORCHA

You heard your daughter. I'm the *rusalka*. I'm fearsome and deadly.

ANNA

You've never been one to let others tell you who you are.

SORCHA

Who's letting? They're right. I *am* a witch.

ANNA

A witch who stole her magic.

SORCHA

It's *taken* magic. I am no robber! A robber has no courage. I braved Baba Yaga's den and seized her books for *my* keeping, *my* casting. Power comes to the bold.

ANNA

And she will come for you.

SORCHA

Not with the spells I've spun. She is blind to me, sister. Blind and deaf.

ANNA

You're the one who doesn't see. You've never even tried.

SONG: GOOD ENOUGH

SORCHA

As if you care. Everything came easy to you – friends, work, love. All I had were scraps, but not anymore. Sorcha blazes like a newling sun!

MAYBE MY WITCHCRAFT
IS UNFAIRLY THIEVED,
BUT IT'S GOOD ENOUGH!
GOOD ENOUGH!
WITH IT I'LL TAKE
WHAT YOU ALWAYS ACHIEVED.
OH, THE MEANS ARE QUITE GOOD ENOUGH FOR ME!

WITH A SMALL UNDERSTANDING
OF SPELLS, I DISPATCHED YOU,
MARRIED YOUR HUSBAND,

AND MASTERED YOUR HOME.
I HOLD YOUR KEYS NOW.
I'M SURE THAT I'VE SHOWN
MY SKILL WAS GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU.

Terrible fever, wasn't it? Ungodly, I'd say.

ANNA

YOU'VE HAD REVENGE.
I AGREE. WILL YOU PLEASE
LET THAT BE ENOUGH?

SORCHA

NOT GOOD ENOUGH!
I'LL SEE YOUR DAUGHTER
CUT OFF AT THE KNEES
BEFORE I KNOW WHAT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR ME!

HOW I HAVE WAITED
TO TREAT YOU WITH TORTURE.
NOW THAT I HAVE YOU,
YOU'LL NEVER ESCAPE.

ANNA

I NEVER MEANT YOU
TO FEEL YOU WERE SLIGHTED.

SORCHA

YOU WERE MUCH TOO "GOOD ENOUGH" FOR ME!
WATCH HOW I CONQUER
YOUR TWIGGY, FOOL GIRL.
SO FULL OF SPIRIT,
SO EASY TO SMASH.

ANNA

SISTER, I LOVED YOU.
LET BAD WATERS PASS.

SORCHA

SHE MUST BE COWED!
HER WILL MUST BOW!

Bah! You weary me. (SORCHA reaches out and a Gypsy tosses a broom to her.) I sweep the air of spirits. (She waves the broom; each subsequent wave causes a howl from ANNA.) I clean the four corners.

YOU CAN'T PROTECT HER, DEAR.
MAKE NO MISTAKE.
YOU'RE NOT GOOD ENOUGH. (She waves the broom.) Begone!
NOT GOOD ENOUGH! (She waves the broom.) Begone!

VASI WILL BEND TO ME OR SHE WILL BREAK!
EITHER WAY'S GOOD ENOUGH.
I'M FINALLY GOOD ENOUGH.
MURDER IS GOOD ENOUGH FOR ME! (She waves the broom.) Begone!

(ANNA's last scream fades into echoes and then stills. ANNA exits if the "haunting" option has been exercised. SORCHA shoulders her broom with grim satisfaction. Blackout.)

END OF ACT I, SCENE 2

(NOON stands and gestures, and the lighting shifts accordingly. NIGHT stands immediately after the shift and gestures, causing moonlight to dominate. NOON is aggrieved for a beat, but then he shrugs and sits. NIGHT sits as well. The playing space, revealed by the shifting lights, has been set for a finished dinner in the Pelochik household by the Gypsies. SERGEI and VASILISA enter and sit at the table. MELANOVA delivers an aside.)

MELANOVA

Before anyone accuses me of having preferences, and people have, there *are* men in this story. Sergei Pelochik, here, is Omanovik's blacksmith. A good, solid man. (Suddenly exhibiting VERTRES/SERGEI like a horse for sale.) And such muscles. Not to mention his mane of flowing raven hair.

VERTRES

(Annoyed; this happens far too often.) Momma!

MELANOVA

What? Just in case there's some girl with an interest. I worry about you. When was your last affair?

VERTRES

That affair is none of *your* affair. (To the audience.) Or yours!

MELANOVA

(Pointedly continuing.) Sorry that she lost her temper, Vasilisa seeks counsel from her poppa. What to do about Sorcha? Lucky for her, hardships of metal make normal problems smooth as wine for smiths. A simple song . . .

VERTRES

I refuse.

MELANOVA

You can't refuse. This is an all-singing production.

VERTRES

I will not sing. Once was enough. (The Gypsies ad-lib encouragement.) No! I am captain of this tribe, and the captain does not sing for display! I have my dignity.

MELANOVA

Where? Up your nose?

VERTRES

I put up with most all you say to do, Momma. Singing I can control.

MELANOVA

Fine. (Cranky.) The non-singing smith Sergei . . .

VERTRES

(To the audience.) Can't I have one of your mothers?

MELANOVA

. . . who is quiet until the story continues, listens as only a father can.

VASILISA

(To SERGEI.) I shouldn't have talked back. I know that. I show respect, but then she always has to attack Momma.

SERGEI

The way you two fight. It burdens the family, *devushka*.

VASILISA

She does that alone. Poking. Prodding. She never stops.

SERGEI

Tell me something. All night long, she leads with the elbows.

VASILISA

(She laughs.) Poor Poppa. (Very honest.) *Pochemu?* Why marry such a woman?

SERGEI

She is your mother's sister – good stock. She holds great promise.

VASILISA

And great flaws.

SERGEI

A man does not abandon promise simply because of flaws.

MELANOVA

(Interrupting.) Oh, come now! That's an excellent place for a song. (She signals the violinist, who begins a vamp.) One and two and . . .

VERTRES

No singing!

MELANOVA

(She stops the violinist with a gesture.) Such unkindness is a wound in my heart.

VASILISA

Poppa? What were you saying?

SERGEI

(As if there was never a break.) I was saying you should try being friends again. All people have a purpose, and a warmth.

VASILISA

Ponuatno. I will try. (Beat.) But she isn't Momma.

SERGEI

Nobody is, (Playfully.) unless it's you.

(SERGEI and VASILISA share a hug.
SORCHA enters to collect the dinner items
and is visibly repulsed. She tromps over to
the table loudly. SERGEI breaks off the hug
and addresses his wife.)

Bila ochin fkusna. A fine dinner.

SORCHA

I worked hard enough at it. (She glares at VASILISA.) By myself.

VASILISA

(Making the promised effort.) The bread was very sweet. Extra honey in the batter?

SORCHA

Less salt. An improvement on Anna's recipe.

VASILISA

(Provoked.) Only a little. The meat was stringy.

SORCHA

Your teeth are too flat. (Sweetly.) It's probably the only way they can fit your face.

VASILISA

At least my face has an excuse.

SORCHA

(To SERGEI.) You see? (To VASILISA.) Bite your tongue!

VASILISA

Learn to cook!

(SORCHA crosses to VASILISA and raises the girl by her apron strings. With her free hand, SORCHA motions as if to slap her stepdaughter. SERGEI, taken off-guard by the earlier exchange, stomps his foot and claps his hands firmly.)

SERGEI

You will *not* strike my daughter!

SORCHA

Someone in this house must show her where she stands. (SORCHA yelps, releases VASILISA, and holds her hand to her breast.) My fingers! (She points at VASILISA's apron, where BABUSHKA leans out.) That doll of hers bit me!

SERGEI

Impossible. Rags have no teeth.

SORCHA

(To VASILISA, ignoring her husband.) Give me that doll. You're seasons past such nonsense. (VASILISA shakes her head, and SORCHA grabs for the doll.) Give it here! (They struggle.) Let go! Let go, I say!

(SERGEI moves to intervene, but VASILISA shoves SORCHA away with ferocious strength while maintaining a tight grip on BABUSHKA. The older woman stumbles and only saves herself from a nasty fall by grabbing the table. The physical violence surprises everyone. VASILISA looks from her father to SORCHA and then runs out of the playing space. She remains onstage, but freezes. SORCHA turns to SERGEI.)

SORCHA

Not even a beggar should be treated so.

SERGEI

The doll is hers. It holds her momma's love.

SORCHA

She needs to forget her mother.

(SERGEI becomes distant. SORCHA realizes she has gone too far. She begins to offer an apology, but he halts her with an upraised palm.)

SERGEI

So cruel I did not think you. Perhaps my child is not the only one who wants growing.

(SERGEI turns his back on SORCHA and crosses to his daughter. He takes her in his arms. Beat. SORCHA lifts a dinner trencher off of the table and breaks it between her hands.)

SORCHA

(She drops the trencher pieces.) Enough! (She begins to weave her hands in mystic motions; the lighting becomes sinister.) I'd send her to you, sister, but you'd like that. *Nyet!* She has to suffer for the both of you. Hm. What to use? (Beat.) The fever. (Beat.) For Sergei. Weaker, but enough to worry the girl. (She snickers.) For her, I'll be creative!

(SORCHA's motions become more practiced. As she sings her spell, SERGEI becomes visibly afflicted. He begins to sink away from his daughter.)

SONG: IN MY DAY (SORCHA'S SPELL)

STRIBOG'S BREATH,
CHANNEL NOW FROM IN MY BREAST
A BITTER CHILL.
SVAROZHICH,
LACE YOUR FLAME AROUND IT
WITH YOUR GODLY SKILL.

BLIND BE ROD AND *ROZHANITSY*
TO THE WEAVE I PLY.
SENDING OF MY FROZEN FEELING,

THROUGH THE ETHER FLY.
STRIKE THE MAN
WHO MOLDS THE METAL,
TO HIS SPIRIT PIERCE.
SHROUD HIS LIGHT
AND FLUSH HIS FLESH
WITH DEMON'S FEVER FIERCE!

(SERGEI collapses and a strong wind
ripples across the stage. The playing space
is suddenly darkened, seeped in evil.
VASILISA tries to rouse her father.)

VASILISA

Poppa! Poppa! (She feels his forehead.) Your skin is fire! (She grabs her doll.)
Babushka!

BABUSHKA

He's down hard, love, and he's gone strange all over – muddy from the inside. I can't see
what's wrong.

VASILISA

Then look harder!

BABUSHKA

Howling like a scrub wolf isn't a help.

VASILISA

There must be something . . . (She crosses to a waiting SORCHA.) You must come.
Poppa won't wake up. I think it's the fever. You helped Momma before.

SORCHA

(Acting horrified.) The fever! I told him to burn Anna's blankets! (She grabs VASILISA's arm.) Listen. There's an herb we didn't use with Anna. It may help. You know where Pushkin's Cliff is? (VASILISA nods.) Then go there and bring back the flowers from its base. Yellow at the tips shading to orange in the center. Use the moon to see.

VASILISA

You go. You know what to look for. I'll stay with Poppa.

SORCHA

(Seeing her plan dissolve.) *Nyet!* (She recovers.) That is, I cannot see at night, and we have no moments to whittle down. (Impatiently.) I'll stay. I'm his wife! *You* must be the one! Go! Go now!

(VASILISA, confused and concerned, can only nod in dumb agreement. SORCHA pushes the girl towards offstage. VASILISA begins to exit. BABUSHKA peeps out of the apron as they leave.)

BABUSHKA

Wait! Wait! She's lying! She's *always* lying!

(VASILISA exits completely. SORCHA rubs her hands gleefully and then raises her hands above her head. She is suffused in a sickly green light. All other lighting fades to black.)

END OF ACT I, SCENE 3

(The green light around SORCHA intensifies and she begins to make monstrous gestures, slicing the air aggressively. SERGEI becomes VERTRES and reenters the ring. Parts of misshapen trees are slid forward by Gypsies who also remove the components of the Pelochik household. The avatars exit slyly. A distraught but angry VASILISA is shepherded onstage. The Gypsies not preoccupied with foliage become monsters who threaten her. VASILISA holds BABUSHKA close for protection and strikes out viciously at any figures who approach her. ANNA, shining bright, steps out from behind a tree to drive back some of the ghouls. Any salvation she provides is clearly but a brief respite from the inevitable.)

SONG: LOST FROM THE LIGHT

MONSTERS

OH. OH. HAH. OH.
OO. OH. HAH. OO.

TREES BENDING LOW
TO THE CHILL WINDS THAT BLOW.
EYES PEEKING OUT OF THE HOLLOWS.
WOLVES MAKING MOANS
IN THEIR DANK, DARKLING HOMES;
GHOSTS CRYING TEARS FALSE AND FALLOW.
'WARE OF THE WOODS, CHILD.
BRANCHES STING, THREATENING.
EVERY BEAST IS BRUTE-WILD.
SCREAMS RING MENACING.
TWIST AND TURN HIGH AND LOW.
FALL INTO OUR RAGE AND WOE.

LOST FROM THE LIGHT,
FROM THE WARM, FROM THE KIND.
BLOTTED FROM SIGHT.
CURSED TO HARM, SPIRIT-BLIND.
FEEL US GRAB; FEEL US GRASP
AS YOU SCREAM, AS YOU GASP.
WE WILL FEED
FOREVER ON YOUR FRIGHT.
So nice!
'WARE THE WOODS
THAT KEEP YOU FROM THE LIGHT!

VASILISA

(To BABUSHKA.) Where are they coming from? (Striking out.) Why do they want us?

BABUSHKA

(Retreating into the apron.) I don't know, but I'll think on it. In here!

(Out of the assembled monsters step a
rusalka, pale and dripping lake scum, the
leshy, russet-furred and cloven-hooved, and
a flock of bat-winged wyverns. They taunt
VASILISA.)

RUSALKA

FOLLOW ME AND LAY YOU DOWN
IN THE LAKE WHERE I WAS DROWNED.
BREATHE THE WATER; FILL YOUR LUNGS
WHILE THE FISHES EAT YOUR TONGUE.

LESHY

LESHY-GOBLIN WHO WAS BIRTHED
IN THE DAMPENED, DARKENED EARTH
REACHES OUT FROM BRANCH AND BUD

FOR YOUR WARM, ENRICHING BLOOD.

WYVERNS

THEN THE WYVERNS RISE TO FLAY
ALL YOUR MORTAL MEAT AWAY.
BANISHED FROM THE WORLD OF DAWN,
FEEL OUR VENGEANCE AND OUR SCORN.

(VASILISA breaks free from the hideous group. She throws the *rusalka* aside, and the ghoul bowls over her companions.)

MONSTERS

‘WARE OF THE DARK, GIRL.
RUN AND HIDE, TERRIFIED.
FOUL SHADOWS UNFURL.
FLEE; FLY, HORRIFIED.
HOW WE GRIP. HOW WE REACH.
CREATURES FROM BEYOND THE BREACH!

(The monsters rally. ANNA is dragged offstage. VASILISA tries to coerce BABUSHKA out of the apron, but the doll is unmoved. She couldn’t do much against such concentrated dark magic, anyway. VASILISA grabs a tree branch off the ground and swings it in circles above her head. She plans to sell her life as dearly as possible. The monsters find this ample cause for riotous laughter.)

LOST FROM THE LIGHT,
FROM THE WARM, FROM THE KIND.
BLOTTED FROM SIGHT.
CURSED TO HARM, SPIRIT-BLIND.
FEEL US GRAB; FEEL US GRASP
AS YOU SCREAM, AS YOU GASP.

WE WILL FEED
FOREVER ON YOUR FRIGHT.
So nice!
'WARE THE WOODS
THAT KEEP YOU FROM THE LIGHT!

(MORNING, NOON, and NIGHT rush onstage with shuttered lanterns and mix into the fray. They unshield their lanterns, and the monsters shy away from the strong lights – yellow, orange, and blue, respectively. SORCHA's glow fades and her motions grow desperate.)

HEAR THE FOREST SNAP AND CRACK.
THERE'S NO FIGHTING EVIL BACK!
FLESH AND SKIN. WE'LL SUP AND SNACK.
BONES WE'LL SNAP AND BURN TO BLACK!

MORNING

Push off, you rotters!

MONSTERS

HEAR THE FOREST SNAP AND CRACK.
THERE'S NO FIGHTING EVIL BACK!

NIGHT

Je crache sur vous!

MONSTERS

FLESH AND SKIN. WE'LL SUP AND SNACK.
BONES WE'LL SNAP AND BURN TO BLACK!

NOON

¡No haga que le lastima!

(The monsters retreat into the shadows, growing softer and softer. MORNING, NOON, and NIGHT follow them offstage while castigating the brood of darkness with respective cries of “Your disposition is horrid!”, “You sorry pip!”; “¡Usted no puede tocarme, feo!, ¡Retroceda!”; “Vous non-Français!”, “Vous n’avez aucun goût!” Actors are encouraged to ad-lib beyond these prompts.)

MONSTERS

LOST FROM THE LIGHT!
TURNED AWAY FROM THE DAY.
LOST FROM THE LIGHT! GHOULIES BAY; BOGIES BRAY.
LOST FROM THE LIGHT!

(The monsters exit entirely, chased by the avatars. SORCHA’s illumination is extinguished when the creatures are fully silenced. She gives a despairing cry before her form is obscured by darkness. MORNING, NOON, and NIGHT enter. They are self-congratulatory until they notice VASILISA, who is attempting to regain her composure. They shade their lanterns and rush over to assist her. Banished monsters begin to return as Gypsies; they sit around the playing space. MELANOVA speaks an aside.)

MELANOVA

Thank De Develski! A brush with darkness deferred, and heroes to be welcomed!

(Seeing three strange men rush at her, saviors or not, VASILISA swings her branch in self-defense just as the avatars reach her. She connects, and they fall in a domino line. MELANOVA is aghast.)

Stop! Stop! (The actors freeze.) That is simply not acceptable! (She makes a winding motion, and the players rewind to just before the greeting.) There!

(She claps her hands and the players unfreeze. This time, VASILISA sees the avatars before they can rush to her. She runs at them with her branch in full clubbing position. MELANOVA claps her hands to freeze everyone anew. She winds them back to their starting positions and turns to the audience.)

This remains an adventure, no? (She laughs weakly.) Even for us. (She crosses to VASILISA.) You're hesitant and scared. Forget the blood fury. It's not working. (To the avatars.) And you three, less rush and more hush. Galumphing after a monster-struck waif is the worst way to win her confidence. Trust me. Is everybody ready to give this one more try? (Beat.) Ai. You can respond, you know.

(VASILISA and the avatars nod, but they are clearly focused on getting the moment "right" this time. MELANOVA snorts. She'll believe them when she sees the proof. She seats herself in the Gypsy ring and claps her hands. The avatars spread out and approach VASILISA in an enfolding pattern – one from each side, and one from behind. She is wary, but she has a moment to notice the lanterns and surmise that these men have rescued her from being devoured.)

MORNING

Sun love the child. She's practically trembling.

NOON

Are you sure it's not the weather? *Hace mucho frío.*

NIGHT

One side, *mes frères*. She is in shock and needful of my comforts. (He sweeps VASILISA into an embrace, and she drops her stick.) *Soyez bien, mon enfant.* (He kisses her and then sees her face.) Ew! (He drops her.) Well, that figures! I *would* rescue a damsel who looks like *that*!

NOON

It made *my* day!

MORNING

(Helping VASILISA to rise.) Sorry, miss. Night is just *too* rude, don't you know? Moody is as moody does.

VASILISA

(Wrenching out of his hands.) You could have come sooner!

NIGHT

We save that for the pretty girls.

NOON

(Suggestively.) I'm not so picky, *mi amiga*.

MORNING

(Scooting NOON away.) But you *are* married.

NOON

Que será será.

VASILISA

Just . . . let me calm down. (She gathers herself.) *Spasiba.*

MORNING

Our pleasure, dear. Nasty beasties, those, eh? Sort of like the wifeys, right fellows?

NIGHT

Don't remind me.

MORNING

(To VASILISA.) What are you doing out here at this ghastly hour, hm?

NIGHT

Watch it!

MORNING

No offense, brother.

VASILISA

I'm looking for a flower – yellow petals shading to orange at the center.

NIGHT

Elle est touchée, aussi. You will never find such a thing.

MORNING

Says Mister Gloomy-Face. Whyfore, though, dear?

VASILISA

(As NOON circles her.) For Poppa. He's ill.

MORNING

Well, a darling little nosegay should pep him straight up.

VASILISA

(She beats off NOON's fingers.) It's medicine.

NOON

I've heard that before. She's a party girl. (Dancing.) *Muchacha del partido*.

NIGHT

You would think that.

VASILISA

(Losing patience.) I need to find Pushkin's Cliff, and I can't stand around chatting to you bunch of . . . of . . .

MORNING

Avatars.

VASILISA

Avatar?

MORNING

No, thank you. I don't really fancy the sailors. (He laughs and his brothers groan.) Sorry. I so seldom get the opening. Avatar – an embodiment of an abstraction. The three stages of day, in our case. Morning.

NOON

Noon.

NIGHT

Night.

MORNING

Not to mention our better halves, currently on holiday in the kangaroo continent. Lady Dawn.

NIGHT

Madame Dusk.

NOON

(Giggling.) *Señora* Corona!

NIGHT

Anyway, you are out of luck, *mademoiselle*. *Naturellement*. Pushkin's Cliff has no flowers.

NOON

Ningunos.

MORNING

But we do know someone who has mounds of the petaly things. Uses them as spices.

VASILISA

Then take me there. (She begins to march offstage.) You protect me . . . if I need it.

NOON

That one has *cojónes*!

NIGHT

Which would certainly explain that appalling visage.

MORNING

Please, miss . . .

VASILISA

(She stops.) My *name* is Vasilisa Pelochik.

MORNING

What a splendid little name.

NIGHT

Tell her about *la grande femme*. Ugly isn't necessarily stupid.

MORNING

Quite right, and you should know better than anyone. (NIGHT bows gratefully, missing the dig.) The owner of the aforementioned plants is (He clears his throat.) Baba Yaga. (VASILISA does not respond.) Baba *Yaga*? (Still no response.) Baba *Yaga*?

VASILISA

Witch-grandmother? That's no name for anybody.

NOON

Ella es la abuela.

VASILISA

Ugly, ancient, crazy, or queer, she has what I need. Will you take me there?

MORNING

If you're sure.

VASILISA

I am deadly sure.

BABUSHKA

(In VASILISA's voice.) No *borscht* about it!

(MORNING looks at his brothers. NOON shrugs. NIGHT heaves a huge sigh and nods. They march off in different directions. They realize they are not together, regroup, and try again with similar results. The obvious problem is that each one is trying to lead the others, who dislike being led. VASILISA is impatient with this buffoonery.)

VASILISA

One of you take me someplace!

(The avatars glare at each other, demanding obedience.)

SONG: MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT

MORNING

I KNOW THE WAY.

NOON

LO SÉ MEJOR.

NIGHT

JE LE SAIS MEILLEUR.

AVATARS

FOLLOW ME!

(No one wishes to give ground. This is
sibling rivalry at its worst.)

MORNING

(Points at VASILISA.) Let *her* decide.

NOON AND NIGHT

Fine!

(The avatars crowd around VASILISA.)

AVATARS

FOR YOUR GUIDE
THROUGH THICK AND THIN,
DO YOU CHOOSE

MORNING

(Points at NOON.) HIM

NOON

(Points at NIGHT.) HIM

NIGHT

(Points at MORNING.) OR HIM?

AVATARS

BEAR IN MIND
BEFORE YOU CHOOSE,
WHAT YOU GAIN
AND WHAT YOU LOSE.

NIGHT

Although you'll probably choose poorly, anyway.

AVATARS

WITH BROTHERS
MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT,
THE PATH AHEAD IS BRIGHT AS DAY,

NIGHT

MARVELOUS AND *DISTINGUÉ*,

NOON

¡*MARAVILLOSO*!

MORNING

QUITE.

AVATARS

WE'RE READY TO ASSIST YOU,
SO CHOOSE THE MAN YOU WISH YOU
MAY GO BEFORE YOU:
MORNING, NOON, OR NIGHT!

(MORNING takes VASILISA in hand and minuets with her. As each avatar takes the floor, his individual colors dominate.)

MORNING

MORNING KNOWS THE BYWAYS TINGED IN SILVER DEW
WHERE THE SOUL OF MUSIC LIES GENTLE, FRESH, AND NEW.
I CAN SHOW YOU FOUNTAINS ON MOUNTAINS NEVER SEEN,
AND IT'S SMASHING HOW THEY'RE SPLASHING ON A BED OF GREEN.
DO YOU FANCY STILLNESS? DO YOU FANCY CALM?
WE CAN STROLL BEGINNINGS AS PERFECT AS A PSALM.
FOLLOW AFTER MORNING. COME ALONG.

(NOON grabs VASILISA away from
MORNING and begins to "dirty dance.")

NOON

BUENAS TARDES, SEÑORITA. YOU'RE BETTER OFF WITH NOON.
I CONTROL THE BURNING MIDDAY WITH A LATIN TUNE.
WE CAN DANCE A SIZZLING SAMBA
WHILE THE WOODS WHICK-WHACK A RHUMBA.
THERE'S NO TELLING WHAT I MIGHT UNFOLD.
YOU'D MUCH RATHER HAVE *FIESTA*
THAN A SNORING OLD *SIESTA*.
TAKE THE MIDDLE ROAD THAT'S NEVER COLD.
I CAN THRILL BEYOND WHAT YOU'VE BEEN TOLD.

(NIGHT whips VASILISA away from
NOON. At this point, the girl has had
enough, and she is physically protesting the
rough treatment. NIGHT treats her to a
chilly, brooding stare, and she subsists as if
mesmerized.)

NIGHT

BUT BEST IS WHEN THE BRIGHT OF DAY IS OVER,
 AND ALL THE TRAILS ARE BATHED IN PALING *COLEURS*.
LE LOUP, HE WAITS A SONNET OF *L'AMOUR*
 AND SECRETS WAIT INSIDE A SHADOW'S CORE. *IL FAIT BEAU!*

(He dances a sensuous tango with
 VASILISA, but he is careful to avoid
 examining her face.)

COME RIDE MY COBALT STALLION THROUGH THE GLOAMING,
 CRESTING ON THE STARLIGHT WHILE WE'RE GOING.
 LET ME SHOW YOU WONDERS OF *LE MONDE*,
 AND YOU CAN KEEP THEM SAFELY AS YOUR OWN.

(NIGHT releases VASILISA CS and the
 avatars parade before her in a beauty pageant
 style. Their signature lightings compete for
 dominance.)

MORNING

MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT.

NOON

NOON, NIGHT, AND MORNING.

NIGHT

NIGHT. MORNING. NOON.

NOON

Are we talking solstice or eclipse?

VASILISA

I don't see why I should choose anyone anymore!

(The avatars confer amongst each other.)

MORNING

There's always tradition.

NOON

But then you get to be first.

MORNING

But not best.

NIGHT

Who are we, *messieurs*?

AVATARS

OH, WE ARE
MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT!

(The avatars surround VASILISA and lift her to their shoulders. Sustaining their final harmony in their song, they carry her offstage. Blackout.)

END OF ACT I, SCENE 4

(Lights begin to rise slowly in the playing space. Gypsies leave but return with eldritch clutter – skulls, statuary, crystals – which they stack around the area to suggest a witch’s workshop. Two groups of Rom carry on large wooden pillars with bottoms carved into the semblance of fowl’s feet. These “legs” are set up opposite each other; they should have ropes attached to them which may be pulled in opposition by Gypsies to create the illusion of dancing. The US *vardo* is turned around, opened out, and brought between the legs. Its wheels are removed so that it can rest easily on the ground. This side of the wagon’s interior features windows and a door. BABA YAGA’s hut is suggested in full once the *vardo* has been placed. MELANOVA addresses the audience while this process is completed.)

MELANOVA

How about this, eh? (Mocking.) “The Gypsies – never do they do an honest labor.” Let’s have those one-place wonders build a working witch’s hut! Baba Yaga’s legendary hut on fowl’s feet, no less. Who else dares to deal with evil’s dwelling? Only the Rom!

VERTRES

(Crossing from the ring.) Momma, leave the good spirits alone. Let them watch with their candles from above, as they should.

MELANOVA

They like the involvement.

VERTRES

With everything? My love life? Your fascination with yourself? You're not the Earth Mother. You're just a storytelling *chuvihani*. You overreach for all of us.

MELANOVA

(She slowly pulls a knife and flashes it at him.) Is that a challenge, son?

(Mother and son stare at each other for a beat. He curses and backs down. She scoffs at his weakness.)

You are an old man, hey? Grey and grizzled and weary with worry.

(A metal, pot-belly stove, large enough to hold a man, is brought on and placed slightly off-center in the playing space with its door facing DS. It is followed and offset by a skeleton-bone chair and a wooden table.)

VERTRES

(Bitterly.) Only since birth.

MELANOVA

Give your poor, weak mother some trust. (Mysteriously.) I know the lore I hold.

VERTRES

(Giving up, frustrated.) Do as you will. Nothing changes you.

(VERTRES crosses back into the ring. MELANOVA speeds him on his way with a gesture which causes a sting in VERTRES' legs. He yelps. She snickers and enters the ring. The hut is now fully lit. The Gypsy violinist enters holding a human skull with

glowing eyes – a gruesome puppet. He is to play MASCHAF, BABA YAGA's valet. He settles down in a bored attitude. The door shakes slightly as someone tries to open it. Knocking starts and dies. MORNING, NOON, NIGHT, and VASILISA are behind the door.)

MORNING

Drat the luck. She's left the locks done. What's the charm, Night?

NIGHT

Don't ask me. It's all I can do to turn the stars on.

VASILISA

We could climb in the windows.

MORNING

Last time we tried that, the blamed thing made a game show of eating us. I had straw up my nose for a week. No, thank you.

NOON

De nada.

MORNING

You're such a middle child, Noon – spectacularly unhelpful.

NIGHT

It is his special gift.

VASILISA

(After an uncomfortable beat.) Maybe she left the key with a neighbor.

MORNING

Bless the child. There are no neighbors.

NIGHT

Unless you count *le cimetière*.

NOON

But *Señor Maschaf* is going nowhere.

MORNING

Too right! Brilliant! (Calling loudly.) Maschaf! Yoo-hoo! Maschaf!

(MASCHAF makes a quarter turn to the door, yawning as he moves. When moving like this, the skull puppet should be bobbed to suggest floating. Otherwise, it should rest on flat surfaces as would a normal skull.)

MASCHAF

(Spectacularly unmoved.) I hear you.

MORNING

Would you mind terribly opening the door?

MASCHAF

I'm an undead valet, not a butler. (Sighing.) There is a difference.

NIGHT

S'il vous plaît, Maschaf? I'll scrub the spiders off your molars.

MASCHAF

(Considering.) And a skull rub.

NIGHT

But of course.

MASCHAF

Done. "Sturdy hut, unbolt your locks. Heavy doors, unseal your latches. Metal bars, be done your binding."

(The door swings open and the avatars collapse into the hut. VASILISA follows and closes the door behind her. The avatars rise and cross to what are clearly their accustomed spots within the hut, treating the stage area as an extension of space wherever possible.)

NOON

(Discovering a smoking pipe among the clutter.) ¡*Qué suerte!* She forgot her pipe. (He picks it up and takes a draw.) That's the stuff! (He drops into the skeleton chair.) Hee-hee!

MORNING

Oh, look . . .

NIGHT

(Disgusted.) *Oui. Oui.* High Noon.

MORNING

You've heard it before.

NIGHT

Sadly.

(VASILISA has been purposefully poking around in search of her flowers. She comes across a freshly-settled MASCHAF.)

VASILISA

What's in here? (She pokes a finger into MASCHAF's nasal cavity.) A candle?

MASCHAF

(He chomps at her, and she jumps.) Stop that! I didn't invite you inside my head. (To MORNING.) She followed you home, I bet.

MORNING

Miss Vasilisa Pelochik, I love that name, meet Maschaf.

VASILISA

(To MASCHAF, harshly.) Where are the flowers?

MASCHAF

(Sarcastically.) Oh, Baba Yaga is the flower Tzarevna.

VASILISA

(To the avatars.) That's nothing like what you all told me.

NOON

(Still under the influence.) Whee!

MASCHAF

By the gods, no one is this dull!

NIGHT

And no one is more plain.

VASILISA

(Rounding on the avatar.) I've had enough of you!

MASCHAF

Then you should leave! (VASILISA turns to him.) Go to the door, step past the threshold, and run like a crazy deer! That stove is just your size, *da*?

VASILISA

(As if to a child.) I'm not leaving.

MASCHAF

You *can't* be saying this! Baba Yaga is an ogress! She eats people! Do you want to be a talking bookend like me? Run before your legs are on a plate!

VASILISA

I'm not listening to some pushy skull with day-glow eyes. I came here for a reason, and I'm staying. (Fiercely, scaring MASCHAF.) I . . . need . . . flowers!

NOON

Bueno. (He applauds.) What a woman!

(The Gypsies serve as an invisible chorus, garbling and overlapping “Baba Yaga” as NOON applauds. The door swings open and the ogress enters, flushed and angry. She holds her signature mortar-and-pestle over one shoulder with one hand and a skull-and-spine staff with the other. She wears bone jewelry which sets off a green complexion, and her steel teeth flash in the light. Her utterances of food are delivered as if she suffers from an exaggerated Tourette’s Syndrome. She shouldn’t be aware of these yummy slips.)

YAGA

(Bowing ironically.) *Spasiba. Spasiba.* Appreciation is a tender delight. (The noise cuts off immediately, and she tosses aside the mortar-and-pestle.) I know I’m home early, boys, but it couldn’t be helped. Noodles. There I was, biting off the treetops, when I found it wasn’t morning anymore . . . or noon . . . or night. It was nothing. (MORNING and NIGHT begin to show concern.) But this couldn’t be. (Building to a scream.) You three are *always* doing your job and not lounging around like useless *igrushki*!

NOON

Hey, witchy baby! (He puffs on the pipe.) Don’t get your bad self all twisty. It’s all good.

(BABA YAGA crosses to NOON and pulls the pipe from between his lips with a popping noise. She smiles at him with all her metal-mouthed glory.)

YAGA

Get out of my chair. (He does so and she sits after knocking out the pipe.) You cabbage heads! If time stops, people stop. If people stop, I can’t find them to chase them. Caviar. If I can’t chase them, I can’t eat them, and I get cranky! (The avatars jump as one.) Sorry. My blood sugar, you know.

MORNING

Quite right.

NIGHT

Madame's appetite is a distinct priority.

NOON

Es verdad. (Still reeling.) Whee!

YAGA

Why you always . . . (She sniffs.) I smell a smell that is Russian. (She turns immediately to VASILISA.) You. (Beat, then a grin.) *Zdrastvuyte.* Sausage.

(VASILISA is perplexed by BABA YAGA.
The older woman doesn't look threatening,
but she exudes an aura of prickly discomfort.
The girl opts to be polite, but she
contemplates the ogress carefully.)

VASILISA

Gazpazha.

MORNING

This is Miss Vasilisa Pelochik, mistress. She's come about your spices.

YAGA

Spice is nice. Oatcake. (Leering at the girl.) I'm surprised you waited for me. Most would not.

MASCHAF

I tried to tell her. I *know* I tried.

YAGA

Quiet! No squabble to upset the company. It's bad for digestion. (To the avatars.) Go! I know how to deal with this. *Pelmeny*.

MORNING

Love to. Absolutely. But we do feel a trifle, teensy, tiny bit responsible for her. Ethical considerations dictate . . .

YAGA

Adin. Dva. Tri. Chitiri. Pyat. (The avatars exit at a dead run.) So . . . Drumstick. Let us talk. (She advances, but VASILISA doesn't move.) No screams. No pleas. (Beat.) You should maybe tremble some. Let your fear out. (Beat.) For flavor's sake.

VASILISA

I'm not afraid of you. (Beat.) I don't even know you.

YAGA

(Stopping cold.) That's different. Insane, but different. (Beat, studying VASILISA.) You come from the south. Biscuit. Hm. They have forgotten me. Many years ago, that was.

VASILISA

I don't see how. I'm sorry to say it, but you're very strange.

YAGA

I don't deny. (She laughs and claps her hands.) This should be a treat.

(Gypsies produce puppet bats and spiders – BABA YAGA's familiars. Other Rom pick up skulls. They begin to dance around the hut. The moveable fowl's legs should be manipulated by any free Gypsies)

once the song proper has begun.)

WELL, THEN, MY CHICK,
YOU'RE IN AN AWFUL FIX.
FOR THIS DANGER,
YOU DON'T NEED A SEER.
BEFORE YOU STANDS,
TO YOUR DISTRESS,
THIS FROZEN COUNTRY'S CONJURESS
WHOSE FACE SHOULD HAVE YOU
PARALYZED WITH FEAR.

YOU'RE IN THE HUT OF BABA YAGA,
THE NIGHTMARE WITCH
WITH SKIN OF GLACIAL GREEN.
I'M THE OGRESS OF THE IRON TEETH,
SOWER OF DESPAIR AND GRIEF.
I'M THE NASTY
GRANDMOTHER OF MEAN.

I FLY AROUND
INSIDE A STONY MORTAR.

SPIDERS

WITH A PESTLE.

YAGA

WITH MY BROOM,
I SWEEP MY TRACKS AWAY.

BATS

THEY'RE GONE BY DAY.

YAGA

FOR SLAVIC FOLK OF EVERY KIND,

I'VE A RECIPE IN MIND
FROM BAKER BROTH
TO SWEET FARMER *SOUFFLÉ*.
WHY, I'VE EVEN HAD A TSAR
BOILING IN MY SAMOVAR.
YOU'RE IN THE HUT . . .

SKULLS

THE DANCING HUT!

YAGA

OF BABA YAGA,
THE ANCIENT CRONE
WITH SQUEAKING YELLOW SHOES.
DON'T BE SCARED,
MY LITTLE *BORSCHT*,
I LIKE FOLK OF EVERY SORT,
ESPECIALLY PREPARED
IN SPICY STEWS.

YET SOMETIMES,
IT'S HARD TO BE A LEGEND.

BATS AND SKULLS

SO HARD.

YAGA

ONE GROWS TIRED
OF THE SHRIEKS AND SCREAMS.

SPIDERS AND SKULLS

IT'S TIRING.

YAGA

BUT THEN I EAT A SERF OR THREE
OR FILL THE WOODS WITH CACKLING,
AND I KNOW I'M LIVING OUT MY DREAMS.
OY-OY-AI-DAI-BOI-DOI.
OY. LOI-DOI-AI-DOI-BOI.

YOU'RE IN THE HUT OF BABA YAGA,
THE CHICKEN-LEGGED HOME
OF NE'ER-DO-WELL.
SAY A PRAYER, MY PUDDING-PIE.
NOW IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO DIE.
I'M SO GLAD YOU STOPPED BY
FOR A SPELL.
WELCOME TO THE HUT . . .

FAMILIARS AND SKULLS

WELCOME TO THE HUT!

YAGA

THE DANCING HUT OF BABA YAGA!

(Cackling with glee, BABA YAGA sweeps VASILISA into the stove and slams the door with a clang. Blackout on the playing space and the Gypsy ring. Just before this blackout, however, BABA YAGA has a final food-shout tic: "Spotted dick!" or "Bouillabaisse!")

END OF ACT I, SCENE 5

END OF ACT I

(MORNING is lit by a spot. He whistles gaily, and cool grey lighting rises to reveal the Gypsy ring and its sitters. The gauge is now half-full. Lights rise further to disclose that the playing area remains set for BABA YAGA's hut, but the DS door on the stove has been removed to reveal a cramped and upset VASILISA. The door shall be "suggested" by the actors when it is needed. BABA YAGA and MASCHAF stand to the side of the stove. She is reading from a large leather-bound cookbook which rests on a rickety podium. She snacks on biscuits she pulls from her clothes and giggles as she turns the pages of the book in search of the best recipe for the occasion. MASCHAF shakes his head with worry, glancing sadly at the stove once or twice. MELANOVA speaks an aside.)

MELANOVA

Suppertime!

SONG: WHAT TO MAKE?

YAGA

SOME LIKE EATING BEEF
FROM A BULL OR A COW.
OTHERS SLICE OFF PORK
FROM A BOAR OR A SOW.
FISH AND CHICKEN
BOTH CAN BE DIVERSIONAL,
BUT A MEAL FOR ME'S NO MEAL
UNLESS IT'S PERSONAL.

(The “what to make” questions BABA YAGA addresses to herself in the chorus are rhetorical. She has any number of answers for them readily available, so they don’t spark her question obsession too fiercely. This obsession is explained more fully by the songs “Ask” and “Stains Upon the Snow.” If desired, more obvious foreshadowing for her condition can be shown by her finger jerking instantaneously to a recipe in her book after each “what to make” phrase.)

WHAT TO MAKE? WHAT TO MAKE
FROM THIS GIRL WHO’S HERE FOR SUPPER?
THERE ARE MEALS TO BE MADE
ONCE I TAKE THE TIME TO SNUFF HER.
MY COOKBOOK’S FILLED TO BURSTING
WITH THE TIDBITS FOR MY TONGUE.
YUMMY OPTIONS ARE UNENDING
THOUGH SHE’S FINISHED WHEN I’M DONE.

(To MASCHAF.) I think a nice omelette with some *kasha*.

MASCHAF

No eggs large enough. You ate the last Roc-bird.

YAGA

With the bad curry.

MASCHAF

And wiped out Jusopovken.

MASCHAF AND YAGA

Bad reaction.

YAGA

I COULD FRY SOME *LATKES*
AND FOLD HER INSIDE.

MASCHAF

OIL GIVES YOU HEADACHES
OF UNHOLY SIZE.

YAGA

MAYBE I SHOULD STUFF HER
FULL OF CAVIAR.

MASCHAF

LIKE YOU NEED THAT MANY
CALORIES THE WAY YOU ARE.

YAGA

(With menace.) I didn't quite catch that.

MASCHAF

Thin! You're thin!

YAGA

WHAT TO MAKE? WHAT TO MAKE
FROM THIS GIRL WHO'S HERE FOR SUPPER?
THERE ARE MEALS TO BE MADE
ONCE I TAKE THE TIME TO SNUFF HER.
MY COOKBOOK'S FILLED TO BURSTING
WITH THE TIDBITS FOR MY TONGUE.
YUMMY OPTIONS ARE UNENDING
THOUGH SHE'S FINISHED WHEN I'M DONE.

I could turn her into gingerbread. She's already pasty.

MASCHAF

Venna tried that one in Germany.

YAGA

Such a grim end. Those rotten kids!

MASCHAF AND YAGA

Not a good idea.

YAGA

I SHOULD MAKE KIELBASA
FROM SMOKED MORTAL SKIN.

MASCHAF

SAUSAGE TURNS OUT DRY
AND THE SPICE GIVES YOU WIND.

YAGA

STEWING HER IN WATER
WOULD BREW BRILLIANT BROTH.

MASCHAF

BUT YOU ALWAYS GET SO NERVY
WHEN YOU WATCH THE POT.

Although "obsessive maniac" is a look that works for you.

(As an option, MASCHAF can sing along
during the final chorus. He should change
the first-person forms to second-person

or third-person forms if he does sing.)

YAGA

WHAT TO MAKE? WHAT TO MAKE
FROM THIS GIRL WHO'S HERE FOR SUPPER?
THERE ARE MEALS TO BE MADE
ONCE I TAKE THE TIME TO SNUFF HER.
MY COOKBOOK'S FILLED TO BURSTING
WITH THE TIDBITS FOR MY TONGUE.
YUMMY OPTIONS ARE UNENDING
THOUGH SHE'S FINISHED WHEN I'M DONE.

MASCHAF

You really shouldn't bother with recipes. She isn't dead. It's poor taste to go on like this when she can still hear you.

YAGA

(Nose in the her book.) I know more about taste than anyone.

MASCHAF

I mean social taste, and you know it.

(BABA YAGA lifts one of the burner-plates
up from the range on the stove. VASILISA
curses her: "You hag!"; "Let me out!"
BABA YAGA lets the plate fall back into
place.)

YAGA

She doesn't sound offended.

MASCHAF

So you're the authority on scared serf girls.

YAGA

(Back in her book.) I know more on that than you might suppose. (Beat, then she looks up.) One thousand, two hundred and fifty-seven delicious dishes, and not a one feels adequate.

MASCHAF

Then think about food instead of dishes.

YAGA

Don't press me, Maschaf.

MASCHAF

Talk about unappetizing.

YAGA

(She lets it pass.) Nobody's come here willingly for many snows. Minestrone. We should prepare a specialty to go in the book as a remembrance.

MASCHAF

That book is bathed in blood.

YAGA

Which makes the pages turn *so* easily. *Langyet*. I need inspiration.

(During the above exchange, lights brighten on VASILISA. She struggles with her apron. BABUSHKA pops out. The doll pushes up one of the burner-plates just as BABA YAGA finishes speaking.)

BABUSHKA

(In MASCHAF's voice.) Let the girl cook.

YAGA

(To MASCHAF.) I did not seek counsel! (MASCHAF begins to protest, dumbfounded.) No matter. The idea is . . . appealing. (Undercutting MASCHAF.) *Slightly* appealing.

BABUSHKA

(Still in MASCHAF's voice.) You have other things to do, anyway.

(MASCHAF turns to the stove, obviously annoyed. The burner-plate clinks shut. BABUSHKA retreats back into VASILISA's apron.)

YAGA

I *was* going to trade spells today. There's a sister in the woods. I'm running low on curdle hexes. (She makes up her mind.) An experiment, then, and there is always the cook if the plates are poor. (To MASCHAF, fiercely.) My broom is . . .

MASCHAF

(In a snit.) Somewhere. If you'd clean this walking wattle heap you'd find things.

YAGA

(She finds her broom.) You could do more than *kvetch* about it.

MASCHAF

I would, but, let's see, I have no *hands*. Somebody chewed them off before I could work them down.

YAGA

I should have taken your jaw first. (Beat.) A thought.

(BABA YAGA waves and pulls with her free hand. VASILISA spills out of the stove. She stands unsteadily, resentment in her every move.)

(To VASILISA.) Listen to Baba. Bagel-braids. I make a deal. Clean this hut before I return, and you will live . . . longer. (Short cackle.) And have a snack ready for me, too. Something light. *Khlep*. Twenty or thirty courses. Maschaf, watch the girl.

(BABA YAGA exits using the hut's door, closing it behind her. VASILISA looks around at the squalor for a long beat. She loses her temper at the cruelty of the situation. She begins to grab skulls at random and hurl them around the stage. MASCHAF crosses to her and raps her skull by "bouncing" on her.)

MASCHAF

Hey! Hey! Those are friends of mine! (VASILISA stills.) There. Not so sure of yourself now. Not so confident that you know everything. Maybe you'll listen to helpful skulls in the future. If you have a future.

VASILISA

(Seething.) My Poppa is dying. I don't trust my step-momma. I've been attacked by monsters and an ogress wants to swallow me like so much *kvas* unless I can do . . . (She searches for a word, but she fails.) the impossible. (Whining.) This is unfair!

MASCHAF

And I haven't had a drop of *vodka* in centuries. So sad.

(Gypsies claim skulls and begin to “float” them around MASCHAF and VASILISA. MORNING, NOON, and NIGHT enter using the hut’s door in time to overhear MASCHAF’s following advice.)

SONG: THE BRIGHT OF OUR EYES

You can do as Baba Yaga says. She is evil, but she is honest. Maybe that’s why she’s evil. (Beat.) There is a method. You just don’t know what she knows about it, or even what *you* know about it.

VASILISA

I only wanted help. Help doesn’t come with tests.

MASCHAF

Cry me the Volga. We all wanted help around here, and look what happened. Brainpan *shtetl* and a load of regrets. (To the skulls.) Am I right?

SKULLS

Da!

WHEN YOU ARE DEAD,
YOU CAN’T GET AHEAD.
YOU CAN’T GO BEYOND
NO MATTER HOW YOU TRY.
TIED TO THE SPOT;
LEFT THERE TO ROT
WHILE ALL OF WORTH
JUST PASSES BY
AND ONLY LINGERS BRIEFLY
IN YOUR EYES.
IN THE EYES!

(The Gypsies bearing the skulls begin a disturbing stop-motion dance. They never move as a group, but the motions of the

moving dancers ripple smoothly into those
dancers who follow. The effect is an ebb
and flow of limbs.)

BY THE BRIGHT
OF OUR EYES EVER BURNING,
WE CAN SEE
MORTAL LIFE SO ALLURING,
BUT WE CAN'T PARTICIPATE
FOR WE SIGNED
AND SEALED OUR FATE
WHEN WE MADE A WISH,
A FOOLISH WISH,
THAT MADE US DISHES
FOR THE WITCH
AND NOW WE ARE
FOREVER YEARNING.

SKULL 1

TWICE THE YIELD OF CROPS
IN A SINGLE SEASON
SEEMED WHAT I WAS DUE,
SEEMED A PROPER REASON
FOR SEEKING OUT THE OGRESS,
BUT HOW WAS I TO GUESS
JUST HOW MY DREAM WAS TRIED?
SHE HAD ME FERTILIZED!

SKULL 2

I WAS FILLED WITH FEAR
THAT WITH EACH PASSING YEAR,
I WAS TURNING WRINKLED AND SPOTTED.
HOW I BEGGED AND PRAYED
SHE'D TAKE MY LINES AWAY,
SO SHE TOOK THE SKIN
THAT I THOUGHT ROTTED.

AVATARS

WE DESIRED TRAVEL FAR
BEYOND OUR TINY HOMELAND.
BABA SET US FREE TO ROAM
BY HITCHING US TO SKY AND STARS.

NOON

EN LAS MALAS MENTES.

NIGHT

AH, NOS DESTINS TRISTES.

MORNING

No more bodies, just the souls.

NIGHT

J'admets that we see the world.

NOON

Three times a day every day.

AVATARS AND SKULLS

OUR DEAREST WISH
WAS GRANTED IN A BREATH,
FOR ALL SOLUTIONS
SLEEP INSIDE OF DEATH.
DEATH! DEATH!

VASILISA

I'M NOT AS SELFISH AS YOU WERE.
YOU'RE NOT AT ALL LIKE ME.

YOU SET YOUR GREED
IN FRONT OF HER,
BUT ALL I WANT TO SEE
IS POPPA FREE OF FEVER.
YOU SHOULD BE FAST BELIEVERS
IN MY WORTHINESS.

MORNING

BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT
YOU'RE SHOWING, MISS.

It seems you want to heal your father because *you* need him. Still unselfish?

VASILISA

I can't lose him, too. I won't.

MASCHAF

It's a dangerous thing to say "I."

(As MASCHAF sings the following verse,
the avatars and dancing Gypsy skull-
handlers make mock-obeisance to him.
Their movements become progressively
forced and heavy, as if the air presses
heavily upon them.)

I WAS MASCHAF UNITGEY,
THE NINTH REALM TSAREVICH.
NO ONE COULD STAND OVER ME.
I WAS STRONG. I WAS RICH,
BUT I WANTED MORE.
I WANTED TO EXPLORE
THE SECRETS THAT LAY
OUT BEYOND THE LIVING REALM,
TO HOLD THE WISDOM FAST
OF LEAVINGS FROM THE PAST

AND GRAB THE FUTURE
THROUGH A MAGIC SPELL.
I SAID "I," AND THAT "I"
WAS SO PRESUMPTUOUS.

SKULLS

WE SAID "I," AND THAT
HAD CRUEL MISFORTUNE DONE TO US!

Riches! Power! Fame!

BY THE BRIGHT OF OUR EYES
HOT BUT EMPTY,
WE WATCH OVER THE FLOW
OF THE CENTURIES,
GRIEVING FOR WHAT
WE HAVE LOST
BY OUR DISMAL
CHOICE TO CROSS
PAST THAT HIDDEN LINE,
THAT SHROUDED SIGN
THAT BINDS A MAN
INSIDE HIS TIME
AND KEEPS HIM SAFE
AND SURE AND FINE AND FREE.

SKULL 1 AND 2

BY THE BRIGHT . . .

MASCHAF AND MORNING

BY THE BRIGHT . . .

NIGHT AND NOON

BY THE BRIGHT . . .

REMAINING SKULLS

BY THE BRIGHT . . .

(The dancers draw away from the playing space, pulled as if by an onus.)

AVATARS AND SKULLS

OF OUR EYES!

(The Gypsies drop their skulls and reclaim their places in the ring. The effect should be that the “spirits” in the skulls wink out – a second death. BABUSHKA begins to sob loudly. This must be a wild, heaving sound. VASILISA lifts the doll out of her apron, revealing that BABUSHKA is hunched over in her distress. The doll addresses MASCHAF and the avatars.)

BABUSHKA

How terrible. Such *tsuris*. Eternities of death unending. It’s all so . . . so . . . (Abruptly back to herself.) Pathetic, that’s what it is! So we suffer. Feh. We always suffer. Maybe you want we should suffer in a cottage by the ocean, but swim there we can’t.

MASCHAF

A golem!

MORNING

A dolly!

NOON

(He pokes her.) A tiny little woman. (She slaps him.) ¡*Caramba!*

BABUSHKA

You want pawings, better you should find a cat.

NIGHT

Quel dommage! Outside magic. *Madame* will skin us all.

MASCHAF

Speak for yourself. I gave at the *izba*.

BABUSHKA

You all moan louder than Plain-Face Petrushka here. (She jerks her head at VASILISA.) I ask you, what have I done, rags and feathers that I am, to be surrounded by such doom-dummies?

MORNING

Oh, I say. (He chuckles.) That's clever. She *does* have a flair for diction.

NIGHT

(Advancing on BABUSHKA.) No saucy *poupée* judges my misery!

BABUSHKA

Boychik, you don't know from misery. Long life, a wife . . . (To the avatars.) Wives for all of you, such a blessing.

MORNING

(Points at VASILISA's apron.) She's been in there all along?

VASILISA

All along . . . (She shakes the doll.) What do you mean leaving me alone with those monsters? You're supposed to help me!

BABUSHKA

Like I can wield a stick like you? (The shaking stops.) These arms, they're like stuffing. Wait. They are stuffing. Silly me. I do what I can, if I can, as I can, Lovey. You know I care. There's a good girl.

NOON

Estoy muy confuso.

MASCHAF

(To VASILISA.) There's your solution. Tell the doll to do Baba's chores. She's a helpmeet. That's what they're for.

BABUSHKA

(To MASCHAF.) Why don't I volunteer *you* for hard labor sometime, eh?

VASILISA

(To BABUSHKA.) Can you help? Tell me true. Three words or less.

BABUSHKA

True. (Beat, as she looks around.) But not like I am. Throw me out the window. I'll need a running start.

NIGHT

Avec plaisir.

(NIGHT grabs the doll and throws her offstage. A bright flash explodes, and running feet are heard. ANNA, dressed as BABUSHKA, enters at a run. She laughs as everyone stares at her transfigured body.)

SONG: LEAVE IT TO BABUSHKA

BABUSHKA

(Indicating her body.) Working clothes!

(She dances merrily with VASILISA.)

HAVE A DEED THAT YOU NEED DONE?
LEAVE IT TO BABUSHKA!
WRING HER RAGS WITH
ANY SORT OF TASK.
ALL HER STUFFING'S
STITCHED TO SERVE,
TAILOR-MADE FOR DUTY.
SHE'S A DOLL WHO ACTS
ON WHAT SHE'S ASKED.

I CAN CHOP THE WOOD
FOR TWENTY WINTERS.
I CAN CLEAR THE STONES
OUT OF THE FIELDS.
I DON'T TIRE; I DON'T ACHE.
ODD JOBS ARE A PIECE OF CAKE.
TELL ME WHAT TO DO,
DEAR VASILISA.

(She stops dancing and turns to her mistress,
but VASILISA is suddenly shy.)

So tell me what to do already. I know I'm a living doll and a wonder to behold, but
you're burning magic with the once-over. I need an official order here.

VASILISA

You look like Momma.

BABUSHKA

You win the *knish*, but I'm just the parts, not the package. When you want to impress, do
it with a makeover. Clean first, right? (She looks around.) Tacky. Icky. Sticky. What

domovoi died around here? It's like dust and mud had a war and everybody won.

VASILISA

Then let's clean it up.

BABUSHKA

Ah-ah-ah.

VASILISA

(Catching on.) Clean this hut!

BABUSHKA

Sure as a nutcracker likes its handle pulled!

(BABUSHKA cleans. She drafts the avatars into her service, tossing them mops, buckets, and brooms, which they wield awkwardly.)

CLEAN THE FILTHY OGRESS' HUT?
LEAVE IT TO BABUSHKA!
DUST THE SKULLS
AND SPIT-SHINE ANCIENT BONES.
SPLASH AND SCRUB
THE CHICKEN FEET
TILL WE KILL THAT BULLION STINK.
AIR THE HUT TO MAGNIFY ITS MOANS.

MOP THE SMEARS
AWAY THAT HINT OF HORROR.
SWEEP THE PEELING
RUNEWORK OFF THE WALLS.
MAKE THE CURTAINS FLORAL PRINT.
CHANGE THE BLACK TO NAVY.
LEMON-SCENT THE MUSTY CRYSTAL BALLS.

(The hut is cleaned. BABUSHKA snaps her fingers and the cleaning tools, evidently enchanted, fall from the avatars' hands. NIGHT examines his palms.)

NIGHT

My lovely lilies, how red and swollen you are. (He kisses them.) I am so sorry!

NOON

Let's do it again!

MORNING

Perish the thought.

BABUSHKA

No windows, though. They winked at me.

MORNING

Sort of makes you shutter. (His brothers hit him.) Hey!

VASILISA

Now we need a meal. Enough food for three – no – five families.

BABUSHKA

Crack the whip, why don't you? I'm going overboard with a smorgasbord.

(BABUSHKA mimes opening the stove's door. The stove belches out a puff of smoke. MASCHAF "floats" to a table and pushes it closer to BABUSHKA using his forehead. The doll beckons to MORNING, NOON, and NIGHT, and the avatars begin

pulling dish after dish out of the oven. They lay the platters on the table, and BABUSHKA garnishes the food with bits of parsley.)

TASTY MEALS ARE WHAT I'LL MAKE.
LEAVE IT TO BABUSHKA!
SATIATING PLATES ARE ON THE WAY.
ROAST, AND RIBS, AND STURGEON EYES,
COBBLER SWELLING TO THE SKIES,
FOODSTUFF SURE TO GLUT A GOOD GOURMET.

(BABUSHKA crosses her arms and surveys the hut, clearly satisfied. The avatars moan and collapse in utter exhaustion. They've never worked this hard in their unlives. BABUSHKA turns to VASILISA.)

THE HUT IS CLEAN.
THE MEALS ARE MADE.
I'VE NOTHING LEFT TO DO.
NOW I MUST BE AS I WAS BEFORE.
THE JOBS ARE DONE
THAT YAGA LAID.
GOD WATCH OVER YOU.

(BABUSHKA kisses VASILISA quickly but affectionately.)

TELL ME IF YOU
NEED ME, I IMPORE.
SPEAK AND I'LL APPEAR!
LEAVE YOUR PROBLEMS
TO BABUSHKA!

(During her final verse, BABUSHKA backs to the hut's door. The door flips down drawbridge-style and she falls backwards

past the threshold. The door rises but immediately lowers to disgorge BABUSHKA in doll form once more. The door snaps shut firmly. Everyone is left reeling as BABUSHKA's infectious energy ebbs away. VASILISA laughs. Blackout.)

END OF ACT II, SCENE 1

(The Gypsy ring by morning. The set-up for BABA YAGA's hut is walked US by available Gypsies. Other Rom wait with tools to repair the overworked set materials. VERTRES supervises. All characters from the previous scene, save BABA YAGA, exit. MELANOVA and BABA YAGA walk to DCS as the materials are manhandled. The Gypsy violinist, his MASCHAF skull discarded, enters playing a brooding melody on his violin. BABA YAGA motions at the pieces of her hut.)

YAGA

Most impressive. I can scarcely tell a timber out of place.

MELANOVA

The hut is not forgettable, and I did live there for some years.

YAGA

Piroshki. Well-spent time it was, *balshoye spasiba*. I do not take apprentices lightly.

MELANOVA

(Arrogant as ever.) But I showed skill.

YAGA

And you knew it, but you also had respect for the craft. You didn't try to conquer it like some.

MELANOVA

You speak of my replacement. (Beat.) Sorcha was a perfect choice. She had the proper hunger for learning. That she would deal you so ill as she did . . .

YAGA

That is her folly. *Blinis*. I have more trouble with the girls.

MELANOVA

(Probing.) Yet you persist in taking them. No men. Only girls.

YAGA

(Crossing to the gauge, which is filling.) This interests me.

(BABA YAGA reaches to touch the gauge. There is a sizzling noise. She grunts in pain but presses harder, causing the noise to increase in volume. VERTRES dashes over and pulls the gauge away from the ogress.)

VERTRES

You mustn't touch, *gorgia*! Our essence doesn't like outsiders. (Beat, then pointedly.) Perhaps you should go.

YAGA

Baba Yaga goes when she pleases.

VERTRES

Madness, little grandmother. Baba Yaga is a creature in our story.

MELANOVA

(Trying to warn.) Son.

VERTRES

Next you will claim to be Koshchei the Deathless. Momma's stories have everyone playacting.

MELANOVA

(Clearly worried.) Son.

VERTRES

(Setting the gauge down.) I know, Momma: “Pay homage to those who bear the mantle of years.” (To BABA YAGA.) I honor you, woman, but Rom doings aren’t your concern. I wonder how you came here from Omanovik, but it’s best you return.

MELANOVA

(Makes a circle around her heart.) *Mi Duvvel, dick tule opre mande.* (She gestures furiously at the Gypsy violinist.) Now is a time for quiet!

(The violinist stops playing. He waves a fist at MELANOVA angrily. BABA YAGA rubs the hand that she had tried to press against the gauge and stares coldly at VERTRES.)

YAGA

(Calm but focused, advancing.) I am not your little grandmother, and I am not your woman. (She zaps him with a finger-stab, and he reels.) I am the ogress Baba Yaga, despoiler of Cyrillia, and I dislike you, Vertres, son of Melanova. *Kuritsa.* (She zaps him.) Your little story is played in my woods, and it continues by my say. It eases my tiredness with its way of telling truths that happened, but only just. (She is nose to nose with the captain.) I taught your Momma her magic, and her stories shall always be partly mine. (She zaps him once more and then grins, all metal.) Leave us now, and do not bother me again.

(VERTRES is well and truly cowed. He flees US after a despairing look at his mother. There is an awkward silence. The Gypsy violinist resumes his tune, and the Gypsies begin to bustle.)

MELANOVA

(To BABA YAGA, by way of apology.) He has much of his father, a son of Ben.

YAGA

And you wonder why I prefer girls. (Beat.) His effrontery fails to reflect on you. Sugar. Those of his age find little use for legends. I trust the tale you build here will spread my name anew.

SONG: WITCHES TO HAGS

MELANOVA

I hope so, but the name of “witch” itself no longer carries weight.

YAGA

Never!

MELANOVA

(Nodding.) I have seen this as we’ve gone *jallin’ a drom*. Woe to the dying sisterhood. This is why I’ve resorted to telling my own stories. I need the boost.

YAGA

(Considering.) The craft *has* felt weak of late.

MELANOVA

Tell me about it.

WE WERE IN THE LAND
OF THE SHIFTING SAND
WHEN I WAS APPROACHED
BY A PERSIAN VIZIER,
SINISTER AND COLD,
HAD A TOOTH OF GOLD –

PICTURE-PERFECT DOUBLE-DEALING,
KINGDOM-STEALING WIZARD.
HE DIDN'T WANT THE SOOTH,
AND HE DIDN'T WANT A CURSE.
HE ONLY SOUGHT ME OUT
BECAUSE I'D SOMEHOW DROPPED MY PURSE.
HE EVEN CALLED ME GRANNY.

WITCHES TO HAGS. WITCHES TO HAGS.
SPURNED AND DISRESPECTED, THEN DISMISSED.
WITCHES TO HAGS. WITCHES TO HAGS.
GONE, FORGOTTEN, BUT NEVER MISSED.

BABA YAGA

BY THE KARA SHORE . . .
KNOW THE PLACE?

MELANOVA

OF COURSE.

BABA YAGA

I THOUGHT I WOULD
CARRY OFF A TODDLING BABY.
HE WAS PLUMP AND SLEEK,
PICKINGS FOR A WEEK,
JUST THE SORT OF MEAL I'M SHORT OF.
NO IF, BUT, OR MAYBE,
BUT WHEN I GRABBED THE TOT,
HE DIDN'T YELL OR SQUEAL.
I SAID: "I'M BABA YAGA!"
AND HE SAID: "SHE ISN'T REAL!"
THEN HE DUG IN HIS POCKET
AND GAVE ME A COOKIE.
HE NEVER EVEN SHOOK;
HE MADE ME GIVE MY EVILNESS
A SCRUTINIZING LOOK.

MELANOVA

YOU LET HIM GET AWAY.

BABA YAGA

DA, I LET HIM GET AWAY.
I EVEN KEPT THE COOKIE.
IT REMINDS ME EVERY DAY WE'RE . . .

WITCHES TO HAGS. WITCHES TO HAGS.
PUT INSIDE OF FOLK TALES, JIBES, AND JOKES.
WITCHES TO HAGS. WITCHES TO HAGS.
SHADOWS IN THE MINDS OF COMMON FOLKS.

MELANOVA

PROPHECIES OF DOOM,
THEY USED TO PACK A ROOM.

BABA YAGA

NOW THEY ONLY DRAW
A PACK OF BRAINLESS FLIES.
SORCERY OF YORE
USED TO CHILL THEM TO THE CORE.

MELANOVA

NOW THE ONLY CHILL'S
FROM THEIR GUSTY SIGHS.

BABA YAGA

"BABA GRINDS YOUR BONES
TO MAKE HER BREAD."

MELANOVA

DOESN'T REALLY RAISE A SENSE OF DREAD.

BABA YAGA

"HAVE AN APPLE, DEARIE.
TAKE A BITE."

MELANOVA

FRUIT'S FOR PASTRY, NOT FOR FRIGHT.

BABA YAGA

"PRICK YOUR FINGER.
SLEEP ONE HUNDRED YEARS."

MELANOVA

BEAUTY REST IS NEVER CAUSE FOR TEARS.

BABA YAGA

Then I'll reach down your throat and squeeze your heart until I pump the blood out of every hole in your quivering flesh and leave you a drained husk of pitiful mortality that even the most starved wolf in the most wasted woods wouldn't dare to chew upon.

(BABA YAGA cackles maniacally.)

MELANOVA

(Disturbed.) Scary, but for all the wrong reasons.

BABA YAGA

Nobody ever understands my best material.

MELANOVA

WITCHES TO HAGS.
WITCHES TO HAGS.
SPURNED AND DISRESPECTED,
THEN DISMISSED.
WITCHES TO HAGS.
WITCHES TO HAGS.
GONE, FORGOTTEN,
BUT NEVER MISSED.

BABA YAGA

WITCHES TO HAGS.
WITCHES TO HAGS.
PUT INSIDE OF FOLK TALES,
JIBES, AND JOKES.
WITCHES TO HAGS.
WITCHES TO HAGS.
SHADOWS IN THE MINDS
OF COMMON FOLKS.

MELANOVA

A step is in order. (She takes BABA YAGA's hand.) You lead.

YAGA

How generous. Potatoes.

(They perform a dainty step in perfect synchronization. There should be something charming, ancient, and bittersweet about the move, as if it is a dance that is no longer in fashion but was once well-loved by its practitioners.)

MELANOVA AND BABA YAGA

WOE BETIDE THE FALLEN WITCH.
NO ONE SEEMS TO CARE A STITCH.
FEAR-FILLED SACKS TO EMPTY BAGS –
WE'VE BEEN TURNED FROM WITCHES TO HAGS!

(During the final chorus, VERTRES leads his fellow Rom in restoring the set-up for BABA YAGA's hut. It is fully reinstated – and obviously repaired – at the close of "Witches to Hags.")

YAGA

(Sniffing the air.) Something is savory. (She turns to the playing space.) It comes from my hut. Brisket. I can taste the texture.

VERTRES

(Half-heartedly.) It's an illusion!

YAGA

(Mocking him.) It is in *my* story, and that is real enough. (To MELANOVA.) Finish the tale, and make it worthy of retelling. Bon-bons. We must repair our reputations. (As she exits.) *Udachi vam!*

MELANOVA

(Calling after BABA YAGA.) *Tutti sutti mishto*. (To the audience.) To the hut!

(Fade down on the Gypsy ring.)

END OF ACT II, SCENE 2

(Lights rise on the interior of BABA YAGA's hut, set as it was at the end of Scene 1. MORNING, dressed in a Morris Dance outfit, is draping festive bunting around the space. NIGHT is dressed as a maitre d'hôtel. He is playing paper-rock-scissors with a flamenco-outfitted NOON. NIGHT loses the hand-toss, NOON gestures, and the lighting focused on the hut shifts to afternoon intensity. NIGHT goes to stand by the hut's door. VASILISA paces DS, fretting, as MASCHAF looks on.)

VASILISA

This food will not keep. She must return soon, or we might as well have done nothing. (She takes her doll out of her apron.) Babushka? Babushka!

MASCHAF

She's worn out. Let her sleep while she may. Baba Yaga is returning. Believe me. We have a connection, much as I wish otherwise.

NOON

(To VASILISA.) I could have told you about *la abuelita*. She travels beneath my royal *amarillo*.

NIGHT

Which you treat like a child's plaything.

NOON

(Very zen.) Whatever makes the light happy.

MORNING

(Finishing his decorating and turning DS.) Beck-beck-beck. I'll be glad when the old ladies come home to roost and settle you two down. (He adjusts his cap, bells ringing.) How do I look?

VASILISA

Like the Bell Gremlin.

NIGHT

She has you there, brother. You are a proper ding-a-ling. (He snickers.) Why dress in such questionable fashion?

MORNING

I don't know. Call it a whim. With everything so spit-spot, I felt the need for being jolly. I thought I'd treat everyone to a Morris Dance.

NIGHT

(Long-suffering.) *Comment terrible pour nous!*

VASILISA

I think I'd like to see that.

NOON

You'd rather see me flamenco. (Preening.) My Latino heat cannot be contained.

MORNING

Center of the family doesn't mean center of attention, Noon.

NOON

Eres tan injusto. You always keep me down.

MORNING

We indulge you quite a bit. I'm hardly being a meanie by declaring a dance.

NOON

(He shoves MORNING.) But it was my idea.

MORNING

(Shoving back.) It was not, you booby.

(NOON begins to flamenco over MORNING's feet. MORNING finds his Morris stick and swats at his brother. NOON takes flight and MORNING chases him around the hut.)

NIGHT

(Prophetic.) It's all so much fun until someone loses a time zone.

VASILISA

Astanivites! You'll ruin everything if . . .

(The door swings open and BABA YAGA steps into the chaos. The Gypsy sitters release a quick chorus of "Baba Yaga" to announce her entrance, but MORNING and NOON fail to hear the sound.)

. . . she comes back now.

(MORNING levers his Morris stick beneath NOON's chin like a crossbar. He begins to pull, and NOON drums his heels on the floor. BABA YAGA barks a laugh, a chilling, grating noise, and MORNING

immediately releases his brother, who falls gracelessly. They both turn to the ogress.)

YAGA

Supper *and* an entertainment. I feel privileged.

NIGHT

(Trying for a save.) And well you might, *madame*. We at La Chambre De Poulet have arranged everything for your pleasure.

YAGA

(She points at VASILISA.) *You* tell me. Rack of lamb.

VASILISA

I've done your stupid chores. I've cleaned and I've cooked and I've worried and you had better appreciate it all.

YAGA

(Bemused.) I suppose I must. (Beat.) Glove.

(MORNING crosses to BABA YAGA and produces a white glove, which he hands to her. She puts on the glove and uses it to test for dust in obscure places, but she isn't really trying. The avatars follow her in a group – which should be played for comedy – and VASILISA stubbornly holds her ground. BABA YAGA calmly removes the glove after her inspection and slaps the avatars across their faces with it.)

Cake for brains! I smell your interference. No girl could have done this alone. I pride myself on bad housekeeping. Maschaf, you should have prevented this!

MASCHAF

Fine. Blame the valet. Maybe I should have bitten their ankles, dog that I am.

VASILISA

I did the work. (YAGA studies her.) I did it all, and I did it well.

YAGA

We shall discover that. (To the avatars.) You have jobs, I think. Bone and broth.

NIGHT

But first (He waves at the table.), you should sample our fine cuisine. *C'est magnifique!* Nowhere shall you find a more sumptuous collection of delectables. I direct your attention to the desserts. (He kisses his fingers.) So luscious they are sinful. Each one a melting sugary miracle.

(NIGHT crosses to the table and lifts a tray at random. BABA YAGA is tempted mightily, but she holds her appetite in check. A thunderous growl spills out of the theatre sound system – BABA YAGA's stomach protesting.)

YAGA

(Holding her stomach.) Go now, and I may forgive you later.

(MORNING herds his brothers towards the door.)

MORNING

Capital. Steady on, then. Mist to manipulate.

NIGHT

Fog to fix.

NOON

Sunbeams to sift through.

MORNING

(With a jaunty wave.) Best of luck, Miss Pelochik.

YAGA

(She grabs MORNING as the other avatars exit.) Not you, Morning. Crepes. This foolish costume amuses me. You will dance, and I shall eat.

MORNING

(Weakly.) Right you are.

(MORNING begins a highly overdone version of the Morris Dance. He purposely buffoons himself at every chance, working his way to the hut's door with pratfalls and rolls as BABA YAGA eats.)

YAGA

(To VASILISA.) You! (She sits at the table.) Bring me a few of those platters.

MASCHAF

(To VASILISA.) Don't get too close. The table manners are what got me.

(VASILISA serves BABA YAGA, who noisily devours every dish. She throws the platters over her shoulders to be caught by members of the Gypsy ring. MORNING

escapes past the door, jangling madly, but he closes it softly behind him. The meal should be completed within seconds, demonstrating BABA YAGA's supernatural metabolism. She completes her repast with an unladylike belch.)

YAGA

That should last an hour. Now. *Ya vazmu disyert!* (She seizes VASILISA.) Serf shortcake!

VASILISA

(Kicking and biting.) You said you'd let me live!

YAGA

I said "longer." (She prepares to bite VASILISA's arm.) Pepperoni. *Dasvidanya*, Vasilisa the Plain.

VASILISA

(Desperate.) But how will you help Poppa to live?

(The Gypsies shout: "Unselfish! Martyr!" BABA YAGA releases the girl with haste, shaking with some inner conflict. She stills suddenly and then addresses VASILISA with great ceremony. As the song progresses, the hut shakes and its denizens dance around.)

SONG: ASK

YAGA

SUCH A SOUND THAT I HEAR,
AND IT SLIPPED ACROSS

THOSE TENDER LIPS, MY DEAR.

MASCHAF

(To VASILISA.) Now you've done it!

YAGA

SOMEONE ASKED A QUESTION.
SOMEONE ASKED A QUESTION.
SOMEONE LET A RIDDLE
RIFFLE UP INTO MY EAR.
TANTALIZING LESSONS
COME FROM ANSWERED QUESTIONS,
AND I LOVE TO MAKE THOSE
LOVELY LESSONS CRYSTAL CLEAR.

FAMILIARS

(Operated by Gypsies.) Focus, Baba! Focus!

(The familiars are free to ad-lib echoes of
BABA YAGA's "someone asked a
question" lines as they see fit.)

YAGA

I can't help myself!

MYSTERIES, PUZZLES, AND ENIGMAS.
ANY POSER YOU CAN CALL.
CLOSED BOOKS, GNOMICS,
AND CONUNDRUMS.
I CAN PICK THE LOCKS
UPON THEM ALL.
GIRL, I LOVE A QUESTION
BETTER THAN DIGESTION.
PROVING I'M A SMARTY

FEEDS THE HUNGER OF MY MIND.
ANSWERING A QUESTION,
THAT'S WHAT I'M THE BEST IN.
GO AHEAD AND QUERY ME
AND FINALLY GET WISE.

LOOK INTO A TRUE SOLUTION.
LIFT THE BLINDERS OFF YOUR EYES.
JUST REMEMBER THAT THERE'S DANGER
IF YOU CHOOSE TO CATECHIZE.

(To VASILISA.) Listen. Dumpling. Certain questions age a person. I've learned to make that work to my advantage. (Commanding.) Give an age to me.

VASILISA

(Cruelly.) At least a hundred.

YAGA

Try a thousand. (She cackles.) Ask something in the world, and the answer matures you eventually. Ask something of me, and you grow old now! You get all the years it would have taken you to find the little morsel – years which I lose.

VASILISA

All these skulls; their questions. You must be . . .

YAGA

Immortal. Of course, some people waste my time. Marzipan. (She lifts a skull.) I always leave *them* hanging (She tosses the skull offstage.) . . . over the fireplace.

GO AHEAD AND PICK MY BRAIN.
ASK AND YOU'LL RECEIVE.
BUT YOU'D BEST PRAY
WHAT YOU ASK
IS WHAT YOU REALLY NEED.

TELL ME YOUR DILEMMA
IF YOU WANT A GLIMMER
OF THE SUREST WAY TO FIND
AND PAY SALVATION'S PRICE.
ASK YOUR BABA QUESTIONS
IF YOU WOULD INVEST IN
SCRUMPTIOUS LITTLE FUTURES
THAT ARE WARM AND RICH AND NICE.

GET YOUR TROUBLES OFF YOUR CHEST
WITH THE WITCH WHO KNOWS WHAT'S BEST.
COME ON, DEARIE, TRY YOUR LUCK.
SHOW ME THAT YOU'VE GOT SOME GUTS.
LET ME END YOUR STRIFE.
QUESTIONS ARE MY LIFE!
Ask!

MASCHAF

(Laughing wickedly.) Looks like a certain ogress got her stomach squelched. (Mocking.) I'm Baba Yaga. I'll mulch your meat. Wait. Someone asked a question. Ah! I'm falling apart. Ee! Somebody's curious. The pain. (BABA YAGA slaps him.) Ow. The pain!

VASILISA

Maschaf! (Unsure.) She hurt you.

MASCHAF

(Still riding his hilarity.) That sounded like a question. (BABA YAGA raises a hand.) *Zhal. Zhal.* Put down the claw like a good little hag. You have a problem to solve.

YAGA

(To VASILISA.) Clever, clever wording, girl. Highly binding. You think so very quickly. (VASILISA sneaks a look at her hands.) You won't find any decay. *Shashlik!* Noble questions are free. (Her stomach growls.) Sad to say. Let's take a look at "Poppa."

(BABA YAGA waves an arm and the Gypsies surge forward. Half of the Gypsies move the hut set-up SR as the remaining half erect the Pelochik household – a table and chairs – SL. The Gypsies return to their seats. BABA YAGA makes a mystic pass above MASCHAF's dome and turns him so that he is facing SL. The lights in the hut dim until they match the lighting on the Gypsy ring. Subtle projector noise begins to whirl and MASCHAF's eye sockets brighten with whiteness. This same whiteness rises on the Pelochik household. Nobody is home. BABA YAGA waits for a beat and then impatiently whacks MASCHAF. His eyes continue to shine.)

I have none of patience! (She claps her hands.) Morning! Noon! Night!

(The avatars enter from SL. BABA YAGA points at the Pelochik household.)

Speed up time a few cycles over there.

NIGHT

As you wish, oh dreadful evil one.

(NIGHT joins hands with his brothers. He leads them in a macabre clockwise step. NOON seizes control and moves everyone counterclockwise in more sprightly fashion. MORNING pushes everyone back into a clockwise pattern and somehow manages to turn the entire affair into a game of ring-around-the-rosy, giggling as his brothers protest. SERGEI and SORCHA enter as the brothers dance. The two move with the speed of sludge, but they begin to accelerate

in time with the motions of the avatars. The brothers split apart and fly offstage in separate directions. SERGEI and SORCHA are left seated at the table. SERGEI is obviously ill. BABA YAGA's hut fades to black.)

SORCHA

Piotyr was around again. He wants his grillwork.

SERGEI

He'll have it. Tell him . . .

SORCHA

I told him he should come back in a threeday, that you were making his order your foremost project. Natasha was next after Piotyr.

SERGEI

I made promises to her. (He coughs painfully.) You should have her know . . .

SORCHA

She was being fussy. I sent her home with a buzzing earful, I must say. "Sergei is ill, and yet you pester him." It's lucky you have me here, with your condition.

SERGEI

(Bitterly.) Did you tell that to Hyvor or Anatole? I saw them from the window earlier.

(SORCHA makes a throwing motion once she ferrets the slight out of SERGEI's words. SERGEI doesn't see the motion, but he doubles over in pain.)

SORCHA

That's what *they* told *me*. The village knows what a devoted wife I am.

SERGEI

I am still the smith. I should speak with people.

SORCHA

They would only weaken you. (Disturbingly soothing.) Only I can watch you, care for you, coddle you, cure you.

(SERGEI weaves with the flow of words,
his mind clouding. He shakes off the effect
somewhat.)

SERGEI

What of Vasi? Has there been word?

SORCHA

(Spited, but hiding it.) Only that it is a poor daughter who runs away and leaves her poppa on his deathbed.

SERGEI

(With some of his old strength.) I'll not have you spreading those words, wife!

(SORCHA slyly makes a sign and
SERGEI's sickness overpowers him for a
few beats.)

SORCHA

There's no need for gossip from *me*. She took the silver from the smithy, you know. She's a thief . . . and a coward.

SERGEI

(Wheezing out a protest.) My daughter . . .

SONG: YOUR WIFE, SHE KNOWS

SORCHA

There, there. Didn't I tell you she was growing badly? Still, it's nobody's fault. Some weeds look like flowers until they try to bloom.

VASILISA HAD HER LITTLE QUALITIES.
LOYALTY? DEVOTION? MAYBE SO,
BUT THEY ALWAYS SEEMED
A LITTLE WEAK TO ME.
MAYBE THEY WERE NOTHING BUT A SHOW.
LOOK HOW SHE BOLTED
WHEN THE DAY WAS BLACK,
FLEEING LIKE A CHILD;
NEVER LOOKING BACK.
THOUGH I KNOW YOU MISS HER,
BETTER THAT SHE'S THROUGH.
THAT'S NO KIND OF LOVE FOR YOU.

YOUR WIFE, SHE KNOWS
HOW FICKLE FORTUNE FLOWS
AND CHANGES GOOD FOR ILL,
BUT LUCKY YOU,
SHE KNOWS A TRICK OR TWO
FOR TURNING OVER FORTUNE'S WILL.

SERGEI

Plans? What plans do you have?

SORCHA

Natasha was talking about those metal puzzles and castings that are all the rage in Kiev.
I've seen you do as much, and with more skill.

SERGEI

Child's toys. Vasi liked them.

SORCHA

The tinker gossip says the Tsar enjoys these trifles. He pays handsomely.

SERGEI

(He coughs.) We're not moving to Kiev. I have a responsibility to Omanovik.

SORCHA

Just for the winter, maybe. (Trying another tactic.) There are healers in Kiev, and trackers, as well.

SERGEI

They could find my daughter?

SORCHA

Surely, they could, and who knows? If . . . *when* . . . your health resumes, you could sell some pieces. Welcome her home with dresses and bracelets. What a fine father that would make you.

PICTURE ALL THE COSSACKS
COME TO CALL ON US
WITH AN ORDER FROM
THE ROYAL HALL,
READY WITH THE KOPECKS
IN A ROARING FLOW,
SHOWERING A BOUNTY ON US ALL.
ONE LITTLE WINTER.
YOU COULD TAKE US FAR,
WORK US INTO RICHES
WORTHY OF BOYARS.
BUY AWAY YOUR ILLNESS;

BID TO BRING YOUR GIRL.
SEE HOW HAPPINESS UNFURLS.

YOUR WIFE, SHE KNOWS
THE WORKINGS OF THE WORLD
AND KNOWS THAT NOTHING'S FREE.
IF YOU WOULD CONQUER
YOUR DESPAIR AND GLOOM,
LISTEN UP AND FOLLOW ME.

SERGEI

It sounds so wonderful.

SORCHA

It is. It may take you effort; it may cause you some pain, you being sick and all, but I'll be there to goad you on.

SERGEI

Of course. You are my wife.

SORCHA

(Slyly.) Indeed I am.

(SORCHA sings a soliloquy.)

THEN WHEN YOU HAVE LABORED
ALL THAT YOU CAN DO,
I'VE A POISON READY FOR YOUR EAR.
I'LL RELAX AND WATCH IT
EAT AT YOUR INSIDES.
THEN I'LL BE THE WIDOW OF THE YEAR.
OFF WITH THE STRONGBOX,
CATCH ANOTHER MAN.
I'LL CLIMB UP THE LADDER
ANY WAY I CAN.

SORCHA CAN BECOME MORE
THAN A DULLARD'S DRUDGE
IF SHE GIVES HER FATE A NUDGE.

(She returns her attentions to SERGEI.)

YOUR WIFE, SHE KNOWS
WHAT CHOICES YOU SHOULD MAKE
TO FUEL YOUR DREAMS.
SHE LOVES. SHE HONORS,
LIVES BUT TO OBEY,
AND PROMISES YOU FRUITFUL SCHEMES.

SERGEI

(From far away, bewitched.) Kiev . . . it's not so far. We'll leave word with the neighbors.

SORCHA

(Beaming.) And we're already packed.

(The Pelochik household snaps to black.
Lights rise on BABA YAGA's hut.
MASCHAF's eyes are now glowing red.
There is a faint smell of burning celluloid.
The valet groans.)

MASCHAF

That's it. No more! My eyes are burning.

YAGA

Interesno. So that's where she was.

(BABA YAGA claps her hands. Gypsies
rise from the ring. They remove the
materials for the Pelochik household and

move the properties for BABA YAGA's hut
back to their original positions CS.
MELANOVA applauds them and speaks an
aside.)

MELANOVA

We move like the wind as surely as we sing like wolves. You'd think we'd rehearsed this, or something. (BABA YAGA harumphs.) But you'd much rather get back to the ogress.

(MELANOVA rejoins the ring as the
Gypsies return from moving objects around.
VASILISA crosses to the hut's door with
purpose.)

YAGA

Muffins! (To VASILISA.) You will not leave yet.

VASILISA

That light show may have been so much goblin dust, but I won't stay here and have that she-toad I call step-momma rise half as high as she deserves. Not when I can stomp her down.

YAGA

Still your steps!

VASILISA

Then stop me, Baba Yaga! Rattle up those demon bones and slice me open! All you do is threaten, raspy and croaking. I've suffered worse than threats. By Prarkov the Founder, I've suffered enough!

SONG: STAINS UPON THE SNOW

(BABA YAGA is at VASILISA's side in an instant. She was spooky when she faced down VERTRES, but she is rage and death incarnate in this moment.)

YAGA

Prarkov! Suffering! You are not the only one to hurt. I was suffering before your great-grandmother was in swaddling, *child*. The great Baba Yaga knows pain the size of the devil's own black hatred, and she knows Prarkov! Mincemeat. She knows him well!

PRARKOV SEIZED HIS TSARDOM
WITH HANDS AS HARD AS STONE.
HE SQUASHED AND SPLINTERED,
SLICED AND SLIVERED,
ALL HIS FOEMEN'S BONES.
CHEERS ASSAILED THAT MIGHTY MAN
WHEN HE ACHIEVED THE CROWN,
BUT THEY WERE MERELY MASKING FEAR
OF HOW HE PULLED IT DOWN.
HE UNIFIED CYRILLIA,
BUT HIS SOUL WAS FULL OF A
DEVIL'S GLOW THAT COULD BUT GROW
AND CAST HIS SHADOW CRIMSON ON THE SNOW.

(The Gypsies become ghouls, shades of the Hirskeniy village mentioned later in the song. They haunt the stage, focusing most of their ghastliness upon VASILISA.)

SHADES

STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
PRARKOV'S RULE WAS RICH WITH
STAINS UPON THE SNOW.

YAGA

RUTHLESS AS A BLIZZARD,
 BLOODY AND BERSERK,
 HE CARVED HIS MIGHTY DYNASTY
 BY DEALING HATE AND HURT,
 AND IF FOLK WOULDN'T FIGHT OR BOW
 HE PUT THEM TO THE SWORD.
 HE CALLED IT SLAYING TRAITORS
 AND HE CALLED IT JUST REWARD.
 TOWNS WERE BURNED TO ASH
 WHEREVER PRARKOV PASSED,
 AND OVER EVERY PYRE HE WOULD CROW
 WITH LAUGHTER COLDER THAN THE SOMBER SNOW.

SHADES

STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
 STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
 TOWNS WERE TURNED TO GREASY
 STAINS UPON THE SNOW.

YAGA

BUT HIRSKENIY WAS DIFFERENT FROM THE REST.
 FROM THE FLAMES, A SINGLE CHILD FLED.
 SHE HID IN THE SHELTERING WOOD,
 BUT RETURNED WHEN SHE SAFELY COULD
 AND SHE KNELT IN THE SLUSH,
 IN THE CHAR AND THE BLOOD,
 AND SHE RAISED HER HANDS
 TO THE GODS ABOVE
 AND SHE CRIED! AND SHE CRIED!
 AND SHE CRIED: "Why?"

(BABA YAGA breaks down, and the shades
 still. She is young again, and vulnerable for
 a beat or two. She slowly rebuilds her
 defenses during the chorus.)

STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
SHE WAS HEARD AMONG
THE STAINS UPON THE SNOW.

GODS TWISTED HER AND GIFTED HER
WITH MAGICS DARK AS NIGHT
SO SHE COULD FIND HER ANSWER
AND FOR CENTURIES SHE'S TRIED,
BUT ALL SHE'S FOUND ARE QUESTIONS
AND A TASTE FOR HUMAN MEAT
SHE LAYS AT PRARKOV'S FEET
FOR TEACHING HER
THE STRONG MUST EAT THE WEAK.

YAGA

Alone, an ugly monster
Who's frightened of her past,
Wondering if stories
Will redeem her at the last.

If only she could mask it all,
Somehow, at last, forget, but
BABA KNOWS WHAT NO ONE KNOWS
AND BABA CAN'T FORGIVE!

SHADES

STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
STAINS OF EVERY EVIL COLOR.
NOW SHE MAKES HER OWN
FOUL STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
NOW SHE MAKES HER OWN
FOUL STAINS.
NOW SHE MAKES DARK
STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
TERRIBLE MARKS OF WOE.
STAINS UPON THE SNOW.
STAINS ON THE SNOW.
STAINS UPON THE SNOW THAT
CRUELTY AND MALICE SHOW.
THEY FOUL THE GROUND.
STAINS UPON THE SNOW,
CHILL REMINDERS OF THE
WRONGS DONE LONG AGO.
THOSE BRANDS OF PAIN.
EMBLEMS OF WHAT IS
MOST WICKED.

STAINS UPON THE SNOW!
 STAINS UPON THE VIRGIN
 SNOW!
 STAINS UPON THE SNOW!
 ON THE SNOW!
 STAINS UPON THE SNOW!

(BABA YAGA scatters the Gypsies back to their ring with an imperious wave. Her current emotions after this disclosure are inscrutable. VASILISA begins to speak but cannot find words. This awkwardness prompts BABA YAGA into action. She reaches out a hand and one of the Rom tosses a stick into her palm. She crosses to MASCHAF and jams the skull onto the stick barbarically. She hands the stick to VASILISA, who takes it in reflex.)

YAGA

Here. Save your poppa. A mystic light should heal him wholly.

(BABA YAGA crosses to her bony chair and sits. She begins to brood, VASILISA already long departed from her thoughts. The girl takes BABUSHKA out of her apron. She contemplates the doll and the skull, and she looks to the ogress. She kisses BABUSHKA and then crosses to BABA YAGA. She lays the doll in the ogress' lap and exits using the door. The Gypsy violinist follows her. [Henceforth, VASILISA shall operate the skull puppet, but the violinist continues to be MASCHAF's voice.] For the first time, VASILISA knows what it is to feel another's pain. After a beat, BABA YAGA looks at the doll, lifts it in her claws, and chuckles.)

Foolish child. Crazy girl. (Softly.) You are welcome.

(BABUSHKA yawns and stretches. BABA
YAGA operates the doll.)

BABUSHKA

(Looking at BABA YAGA.) Well, hello to you, *mommeleh*. (Beat.) First thing we do is work on your wardrobe. This *bubbe*-from-hell business is no good. You are what you eat, but you shouldn't accessorize with it.

(Blackout.)

END OF ACT II, SCENE 3

(Lights brighten on the Gypsies. They clear away BABA YAGA's hut and reassemble the *vardo* properly. A *troika* or wagon is slid on from SL. A chaotic vamp plays beneath it all. Throughout the following, MORNING, NOON, and NIGHT make ever-more-rapid appearances onstage, causing the lights to shift accordingly and indicate the passage of time. As an option, the avatars can double as their wives during the occasional entrance by using drag, or an actual AURORA, CORONA, and DUSK may be used. VASILISA enters, striding briskly through Forest Bledinil, which may be extended into the theatre audience. MASCHAF is agitated.)

SONG: GOING HOME

MASCHAF

Slow down! If I had lungs, they'd be burst bags.

VASILISA

Sorcha never waits. When she wants a thing, she grabs. I must be swift if I wish to slap her wrist . . . and, oh, how I do.

MASCHAF

I spend far too many days in the company of maddening women.

(Some of the monsters from "Lost from the Light" appear throughout the song and menace VASILISA. MASCHAF's bright eyes drive them away, along with his comments: "Suck molten magic, *dubynia!*", "Hie from the highbeams, bushyface!" Ad-libbing is encouraged.)

VASILISA

I'M GOING HOME! I'M GOING HOME,
 AND I DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO TARRY.
 I'M GOING HOME! I'M GOING HOME!
 I TELL YOU SORCHA SHOULD BE WARY
 FOR MY SKIN IS TIGHT AND TERRIBLE
 BECAUSE OF WHAT I'VE LEARNED.
 SHE HAS TO HAVE HER CRUELTY RETURNED.

(SORCHA enters with the last of the packages to be loaded upon the *troika*/wagon. She may have overpacked, but she clearly has no plans for returning. The bundles on the vehicle shift and SERGEI's head emerges. SORCHA pushes him back beneath the bundles. He fights back and manages to climb to the fore of the vehicle, gamely ignoring his wife. SORCHA sings triumphantly.)

SORCHA

WE'RE LEAVING HOME! WE'RE LEAVING HOME
 TO SEEK OUR FORTUNE IN THE CITY.
 WE'RE LEAVING HOME! WE'RE LEAVING HOME!
 NO MORE STEPDAUGHTER. WHAT A PITY.
 I'M DEPARTING FOR PROSPERITY,
 CONDITIONS I DESERVE.
 FUNNY WHAT YOU CAN ACHIEVE WITH NERVE.

(MELANOVA leads her tribe in a choral admonition.)

GYPSIES

VENGEANCE. MADNESS.
 RIGHTEOUSNESS AND SIN.
 GOODNESS. BADNESS.

KIN IS FIGHTING KIN.
 DESTINY IS READY
 FOR THE TYING OF THE THREAD.
 JUDGMENT COMES FOR LIVING AND FOR DEAD.

(VASILISA slowly makes her way towards SORCHA. The would-be aristocrat checks the ties on her vehicle and makes motions to set it moving, SERGEI's weak protests notwithstanding. The avatars slow their entrances/exits.)

VASILISA	SORCHA	GYPSIES
I'M GOING HOME!	WE'RE LEAVING HOME!	VENGEANCE.
I'M GOING HOME,	WE'RE LEAVING HOME	MADNESS.
AND I DON'T HAVE	TO SEEK OUR	RIGHTEOUSNESS
THE TIME TO TARRY.	FORTUNE IN THE CITY.	AND SIN.
I'M GOING HOME!	WE'RE LEAVING HOME!	GOODNESS.
I'M GOING HOME!	WE'RE LEAVING HOME!	BADNESS.
I TELL YOU SORCHA	NO MORE STEPDAUGHTER.	KIN IS
SHOULD BE WARY	WHAT A PITY.	FIGHTING KIN.
FOR MY SKIN IS TIGHT	I'M DEPARTING FOR	DESTINY IS
AND TERRIBLE	PROSPERITY, CONDITIONS	READY FOR THE
BECAUSE OF	I DESERVE.	TYING OF
WHAT I'VE LEARNED.	FUNNY WHAT	THE THREAD.
SHE HAS TO HAVE	YOU CAN ACHIEVE	JUDGMENT
HER CRUELTY	WITH NERVE.	COMES FOR
RETURNED.		LIVING AND
		FOR DEAD.

(MORNING has the final entrance and exit, so the lights stay fixed at that intensity. VASILISA has reached her home. SORCHA is pushing on the *troika*/wagon. VASILISA stamps the butt of the stick on the ground to catch SORCHA's attention. She throws MASCHAF to SORCHA.)

SONG: POCLIEDNIY SKAZKA

VASILISA

Here, Step-Momma. I found your flowers!

(SORCHA catches the skull-headed stick automatically. MASCHAF's eyebeams illuminate her. Everything/everyone onstage freezes save MASCHAF and the two women.)

MASCHAF

(To SORCHA.) *Zdrastvuyte*, Sorch. Guess what? You're in trouble. (In an echoing shout.) Baba Yaga!

SORCHA

(Fighting to release MASCHAF, but she can't.) Ruined! All ruined! (To VASILISA, desperately.) How could you return? How dare you! You brought *her* here! But not yet. I can . . . I can . . .

(BABA YAGA enters behind SORCHA and grabs the woman's shoulder, slowly pressing her to the floor. SORCHA whimpers.)

YAGA

Well, well. We meet again, thief.

SORCHA MY APPRENTICE,
FINALLY WE FINISH
ALL THE LITTLE SORDID
MATTERS THAT YOU LEFT BEHIND.
NOW YOU'LL LEARN
THE HARD WAY
WHY IT IS THAT I SAY
SEEKING EASY ANSWERS

CROPS UP QUESTIONS
NO ONE LIKES.

SUCH A JOLLY DANCE
WE'LL STEP THROUGH
WITH SOME RATHER
TASTY STOPS.
FOR YOUR MISCHIEFS,
I'LL REPAY YOU.
WELCOME TO
THE CHOPPING BLOCK!

SHADOWS BIND YOUR SPIRIT TIGHT;
LEACH FROM YOU YOUR HUMAN LIGHT;
ALL YOUR ARTFUL GUILE TRIM.
TO THE DANCING HUT YOU'RE SENT!

(Blackout. SORCHA is dragged offstage, screaming, by Gypsies wearing phosphorescent gloves. As an option, a brief spot can wink on and off, revealing a stoic but pleased ANNA. BABA YAGA shouts for light and the stage is instantly lit.)

(To VASILISA.) Now for you. (VASILISA assumes a defensive posture.) Simmer down. Pudding. I'm not casting hungry eyes. You put a handsome course on Baba's table, and I always pay the baker. Name a dream. I'll craft it.

VASILISA

Poppa . . .

YAGA

Will be fine. No Sorcha, no problem. Think of something else, and snap it up. I have company waiting.

VASILISA

(Impassively.) Then don't kill Sorcha. Momma wouldn't want that, and neither do I.

YAGA

Mercy. Huh. Sorcha shall suffer in many crafty, sharp-edged ways, and she shall live many, many years, but that's a pleasure, not a gift. (Beat.) I know. (She makes a mystic pass over VASILISA.) Let everyone see how you've grown, Vasilisa the Beautiful.

(BABA YAGA exits. A strobe flashes around VASILISA. She removes masking and lets her hair down. There is a blast of trumpets, and the strobe ceases. VASILISA is now quite stunning, as beautiful outside as she has been within. SERGEI starts and turns to her. He barely recognizes his daughter, but she sets his confusion to rest.)

VASILISA

POPPA, WHEN I LEFT YOU
I WAS SO CONFUSED AND SCARED.
I WOULD HAVE REMAINED BEHIND
IF ONLY I HAD DARED.
I'VE DISCOVERED WHO I AM
FROM WHAT I'VE SEEN REVEALED.
YOU AND I HAVE BOTH BEEN FULLY HEALED.

SERGEI

(As VASILISA hugs him.) Anna? *Nyet*. Vasi. Where is Sorcha?

VASILISA

(Pulling away.) At supper, very far away. She won't return.

SERGEI

(He sighs.) That is best. (Beat.) I think I was very wrong about her.

VASILISA

Maybe so. (She looks at the *troika*/wagon.) How do you feel about *this*, Poppa?

SERGEI

(Exuberantly.) Like moving back home with my daughter! And, Vasi, keep your aunt Nerida away from me! No more sisters!

VASILISA

(Laughing.) As you wish.

(SERGEI and VASILISA exit, pushing the loaded vehicle ahead of them. The Gypsies roll the *vardo* DS. MELANOVA crosses in front of it. VERTRES enters and joins her there. She addresses him.)

MELANOVA

So how's the gauge, captain of my tribe?

(VERTRES crosses to the gauge and notes that it is completely full. He signals to some Rom, who load the gauge into the *vardo*. There is a charge-up noise. VERTRES is chagrined.)

VERTRES

It brims, Momma. Your idea was sound.

MELANOVA

And you're sorry you doubted your old Momma?

VERTRES

I admit I was wrong, but I will not apologize to you.

MELANOVA

You will, and you'll do it in song. (Beat.) Or I'll marry you off when next we meet with the Kaldesha.

VERTRES

(Horrificed.) You wouldn't.

MELANOVA

(She draws her knife.) Sing, boy! This is rough love at it's best, hey?

GYPSY VIOLINIST

Hey, hey!

VERTRES

MOMMA, FOR MY FOLLY, I REPENT.
PUT YOUR SKINNING KNIFE AWAY.
FROM TODAY, I GO WHERE I AM SENT,
AND I DO THE THINGS YOU SAY.

MELANOVA

(She sheathes her knife.) That's my boy. Insincerity is everything. (To the tribe.) Let's finish this story in style!

GYPSIES

SO WE'VE FOUND OUR FORTUNES,
OUR MERRY FORTUNES!
ALL THE PLAYERS GET WHAT THEY DESERVE.
FORTUNES! WE'VE FOUND FAIR FORTUNE!
NOW A HAPPY ENDING IS ENSURED.

(The Rom prepare to leave as they sing this
final chorus. BABA YAGA springs out of a
CS trap-door, frightening everyone. She
addresses the audience.)

YAGA

UNLESS *YOU* HAVE A QUESTION!

(Blackout over all spaces.)

END OF ACT II, SCENE 4

END OF ACT II

END OF PLAY

Part Two: Lockless in Life

Cast of Characters

VICTOR LOCKLESS, 35-50, a confused wash-out

OLD VICTOR LOCKLESS, 65-80, a bitter hermit

YOUNG VICTOR LOCKLESS, 16-21, a discouraged dreamer

The action takes place inside Victor's head, a space occupied by himself at all three major walks of life. The only physical places involved are those that are shaped by the actions of Victor's three selves. Victor was born in 1945 and he has survived into the twenty-first century, but the ages of his selves are more implied than specific.

Synopsis of Songs

ACT I

SONGS

SELVES

"Awakening"	VICTOR, OLD VICTOR, YOUNG VICTOR
"Plaza Styx"	VICTOR
"Daddy"	VICTOR, YOUNG VICTOR
"Deep Ditty"	VICTOR, OLD VICTOR, YOUNG VICTOR
"Kiss Off"	OLD VICTOR
"My Good Dead Friends"	VICTOR, OLD VICTOR, YOUNG VICTOR
"What's the Use?"	YOUNG VICTOR
"Wreakage"	VICTOR, OLD VICTOR, YOUNG VICTOR
"Stasis King"	OLD VICTOR
"I'd Rather Be Gay"	YOUNG VICTOR
"You There, Daughter"	VICTOR, OLD VICTOR
"My Apology"	VICTOR, OLD VICTOR, YOUNG VICTOR

About the Songs

The listed order of the songs is suggested but far from fixed. It is designed to portray Victor sympathetically. Directors should feel free to shuffle the line-up (and adapt transitions beyond the blackouts) as is appropriate to produce different emotional impacts due to different juxtapositions. There is no definitive sequence.

About the Costumes

The three Victors have established costumes unless otherwise noted: Victor wears a ratty Plaza Styx manager's uniform, Young Victor favors an ensemble of chino

trousers, a white long-sleeved shirt overlaid with a blue blazer, and navy tennis shoes, and Old Victor likes to dress in a faded grey three-piece suit bottomed out by ragged black dress shoes. All of the selves wear their hair parted down the middle, and they allow it to hang just below the ears. Thick, black-rimmed glasses are another permanent fixture of their “look.”

(Blackness. An annoying, beeping alarm sounds. The time is projected US in scarlet numbers and letters as 10:00 A. M. There is a heavy thumping noise. The display jiggles and resettles as 10:00 P. M. VICTOR groans and stumbles onstage as the time fades and the lights rise. He is wearing a grubby nightshirt that ungenerously displays his portly shape. A sink/mirror combination is slid onstage in a slanted attitude, but it has no glass in the mirror frame. VICTOR looks in the frame and then spits into it. He immediately cleans away the spittle, but his basic attitude about himself has been suggested.)

SONG: AWAKENING

VICTOR

Awake and see the way to be
 The same old loser of a middle-aged man.
 Arise and walk the talk you talked
 That sent your future flushing
 Down a sewer pipe to nothing
 Which is where you belong.
 Face your waking as you can,
 Without appeasement or élan.

(VICTOR mimes performing his morning ablutions. Slides of his ugly “morning face” are projected US. They cease when he completes his task.)

Splash the face.
 Sting some life into the dough.
 Shave and use the Old Spice
 In the rhythm of routine
 While your brain is throbbing,

Angry like a broken tambourine,
 From the rocky Scotch and vermouth
 That you drank as pepper shots
 In your grubby, itchy socks
 Watching any batch of reruns on the tube.
 What it takes to be awake!

(YOUNG VICTOR, a forgettable young man, enters from behind the mirror frame. He studies his older self and then tweaks VICTOR's nose across the frame. He addresses VICTOR, who is aghast. YOUNG VICTOR crosses from behind the frame to better accost his older self.)

YOUNG VICTOR

Look at me.

I'm hairy and disgusting.

Not to mention fat and homely.

How could I let this happen?

I waddle when I walk.

I gurgle when I talk.

Let me out!

Let me out!

VICTOR

God, not you again!

Not me again like I once was.

Spare me the diatribe.

Young Victor isn't real.

I'm dying deep inside.

You're the one who let this happen!

La. La. La. La. I'm not listening.

I'm not listening. Shut up. Shut up!

I'm not listening to you today!

Go away!

Go away!

Not today!

(YOUNG VICTOR, banished for the moment, sits down on the stage and grumps. The frame for a closet mirror is slid

onstage. OLD VICTOR rides along with it.
 He is ectomorphic and careworn. He
 addresses VICTOR, who glances into
 the frame briefly, performs a double-take,
 and then exits past it in search of clothes.
 OLD VICTOR steps past the frame.)

OLD VICTOR

You think that you're awake,
 But you're walking in your sleep.

(VICTOR enters at a hop with one leg stuck
 into his trousers. Otherwise, he is wearing
 his Plaza Styx night manager's uniform.)

VICTOR

(Pulling on his pants.) What do you care? You don't exist yet.

OLD VICTOR

But I remember and dismember
 Every memory unhappily.
 There's little of a man in you to see,
 And less of that remains in me.

(VICTOR shoves OLD VICTOR aside and
 spruces up his clothes as best he can.
 Unfortunately, no amount of effort could
 ever make him a snappy dresser.)

VICTOR

Beware the sun. It's set to stun
 Like some ecstatic happy-clock.
 It rises rather easily but takes too long to set.
 That's why I work at night, yet
 Today's begun, and I'm feeling numb,

Whirling down with spirits
For you can't escape yourself upon awakening.

(OLD VICTOR and YOUNG VICTOR
begin to circle VICTOR, who attempts to
ignore them.)

OLD VICTOR

Let the water torture begin. (He points at YOUNG VICTOR.) Drip the first.

(YOUNG VICTOR turns to VICTOR.)

YOUNG VICTOR

I can't believe you blew me up
Into this massive blubber-man
Who leaves a dent in plastic seats
And jiggles like a plate of flan
When he moves . . . which isn't often.
I swear that I stand here and I hear your body soften.

OLD VICTOR

Drop the second.

VICTOR

Dead-ended in my pursuits,
Being large and plain and hirsute,
I'm living proof that some links should go missing.
I may be husky, but I'm only a reduction of myself,
A flimsy pansy player of first-rate failure
Who's ripped in the center and must be filled by something.
Why not food? Why not gorge?
Seal the want. Stitch the pain.
Pour some glue and seal the whole again.

OLD VICTOR

Drip. Drop. Drip.
Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

OLD VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.
Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.
Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

(The selves sing in a glee-club counterpoint that is decidedly ragged. YOUNG VICTOR “haunts” VICTOR while OLD VICTOR pokes each of his other selves to indicate drops of water.)

YOUNG VICTOR

What a fate awaits.
What did I do?
What can I do to stop it?
Fear is screaming at me.
Terrible future.
Horrible future.
Rat-biting future.
Let me out! Let me out!
I’m dying!
I’m smothering!
It’s more than I can take!

VICTOR

Rise and shine.
A nasty line.
I can never shine
Like the morning dew.
Who can hope to shine?
We shine in lines
But sleep in squares
And build despair of blocks
From dreams we forget.
It’s more than
I can take!

OLD VICTOR

Drip. Drip.
Drop. Drop.
Drip. Drip.
Drop. Drop.
Rip goes the skin.
Drip. Drop.
Drip. Drop.
Drip. Drip.
Drop. Drop.
It’s more than
I can take!

YOUNG VICTOR

I’m a slob.

VICTOR

I’m a loser.

OLD VICTOR

I'm disastrous.

YOUNG VICTOR

I'm alone.

VICTOR

Lord, help me! I'm awake!

(Blackout. Lights rise to reveal VICTOR standing alone CS. The beams concentrate on his upper body, suggesting that he is standing behind a counter.)

SONG: PLAZA STYX

VICTOR

Well, I tried frying fries,
Stocking shelves, and pushing ties,
But I just couldn't survive
On the basic slavey wages.
I knew I could do much more
If my work weren't such a chore.
That's when I went out and signed up
For the prize job of midnight.
I went out and found a hotel to hostel.

Plaza Styx sub-assistant night manager.
That's the job I landed.
I don't need a brain
Or the slightest bit of training
To stand behind the desk
And watch parades go by
In the shape and form
Of couples I can only despise.

(Photographs, elaborately gilded at the edges, are projected US as representations of the guests VICTOR names. They fade out after their appropriate verses. Oddly enough, one of the VICTOR selves can be seen in each of the photos, but only at the periphery.)

Room 102 has the newlywed rutters.
 They've burned out two mattresses
 And shouted down the shutters.
 Room 305 houses divorced gay misters.
 I'm sure they'll wear the bedding down
 If they ever drop their sniffers.
 The V.I.P. suite has the girlfriend *du jour*.
 Her playboy likes impressing girls
 And sneaking out the door.

These are the tricks of Plaza Styx.
 Pay a pair of twenties and the night is bright.
 The people make me sick at Plaza Styx
 Because, unlike me,
 They do a lot of things right.

(More photos of guests are projected US as their verses are sung, but now the VICTOR selves dominate the pictures. They are jealously trying to steal the places of the people depicted.)

Room 505 is the primest of prime.
 It's where a certain madam
 Airs her chorus line,
 And 425 b and c concurrently
 House the geriatrics so bereft,
 Sowing all the oats that they have left.
 It really gets you down
 To think that Grampy's gone to town
 And all you can do

Is hope he leaves a tip for you.

(The photos dissolve. VICTOR is fully spotlighted. He strolls along the edge of the stage debating whether or not he should jump off.)

Plaza Styx sub-assistant night managers
 Always have to sing the blues.
 Who to ring and who to let snooze?
 Who to send the overpriced booze?
 It's not me! It's not me! It's not me!
 Stuck inside the bricks of Plaza Styx,
 I have to feel a trifle constrained,
 Treating people to my disdain,
 But not a one has ever complained.
 Why should they, when they're being
 Sustained in the ways they enjoy?

It's like I'm being ground
 Pound by blubbery pound
 Into paste for all the guests to consume,
 But that's okay because, anyway,
 I know I could never pay for a room
 Myself, not with what they pay me –
 Which is still more than I ever made before.

(VICTOR decides not to jump. He returns to the space where his counter is located. The light fades away until only his upper body remains, just as he stood when the song opened.)

Plaza Styx! Plaza Styx!
 It's the drug that I picked
 To prick myself with what wasn't meant.
 The hours aren't brief, but they spell out relief
 To anyone who isn't what his wasn't ought to be
 Just what his is-yet never was.

It's the go-chronically-moronic
 Till you're lost and catatonic
 And so sorrowfully Charonic circle of Hell!
 Plaza Styx!

(Blackout. A crayon-drawing of a father-figure is projected US. The man wears glasses and has a large belly, but his hands are what draw attention – he sports lobster claws. The picture fades as lights rise to reveal VICTOR.)

SONG: DADDY

VICTOR

We all love our fathers and they love us
 Even when they fuss or occasionally cuss.
 It's genetic disposition that makes them care.
 Animal concern. It's nothing that they learn.

I know this firsthand from my own old man
 Who took me to the ball games,
 Wrestling, and monster truck rallies,
 Taught me that alleys are where you find women,
 And gave me beer — taught me fear.

(YOUNG VICTOR enters. He stares into the audience as VICTOR looks on.)

YOUNG VICTOR

What do you want, Daddy? Why do you want that?
 Me? I want Mommy, and a jar of salted dills.
 Don't reach there inside. Don't touch there inside.
 Your fingers are strong. What should I say?
 All I can do is lie still, watching you watch your
 Dirty pictures, and doing them.
 This is wrong, Daddy! This is wrong!

This is wrong! This is wrong!

(YOUNG VICTOR runs offstage. VICTOR simply accepts the fact of the abuse, as he always has.)

VICTOR

I think you knew that all along.
My friends said I was lucky
That my father was interested
In all of the interesting interests I had
Like reading Melville or listening to Wagner
Or spending an hour building Notre Dame to scale,
But then they went home and he took out his bottles
And drank until he wasn't much
Interested anymore, but he was Biblical, at least.

(YOUNG VICTOR enters. He reels from a flurry of blows as he sings.)

YOUNG VICTOR

Why are you hitting me? I've been good. I've obeyed.
I've honored you. I know I'm not as smart as you.
I swear I'm not a smart-ass! Call me dumb! I'm stupid!
Not the belt, please. Please don't use the belt!
Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!
Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! I love you.

(YOUNG VICTOR cowers on the floor.)

VICTOR

Who can I blame for being so messed up
And ashamed of everything?
I'd blame Daddy, but, you see,
It's all so blasé to blame your father
For your neuroses and I know these

Scars on my brain will remain
Highly indelible forever.

Daddy, I loved you. Mommy loved you.
Sister loved you. We all loved you.
We still do, but if you ever come to me
I'll kill you. I'll kill you.

(YOUNG VICTOR lifts his head up.)

VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

I'll kill you, Daddy, and I'll smile.

(OLD VICTOR enters and helps YOUNG VICTOR to stand. Blackout. Lights rise to reveal a subdued VICTOR. He begins humming a fugue. He loses the tune and tries a waltz. Again, the melody disintegrates. He gamely tries whistling "The Entertainer," but that effort can't even gain headway. Music is no longer the friend it once was.)

SONG: DEEP DITTY

VICTOR

Once, I loved music – my muse and my words.
I wooed her form as a worshiper.
Crouched in the desks of classrooms at college,
I spent two years putting scores in a collage
To hang in my mind and stare at in awe.
She was enrapturing . . . no, make that arousing.
But, oh, how she's greyed and sagged and leaned
And taken my talent to patch up her themes.
Music's anything but clean.
She certainly isn't what she seems!

(OLD VICTOR and YOUNG VICTOR
enter from opposite sides of the stage and
look on as VICTOR broods.)

Music isn't something you can keep on the page
Like they teach you in a fancy conservatory.
I'm better off with never having wasted my time
Marking rhythm in a music hall purgatory.
Forget about the classics! I spit upon theory!
I'm cutting loose with compositional hara-kiri!
Pluck out a bass line that's nobody else's but mine.

OLD VICTOR

Bravo! A swan song for the fat man.
Boom-boom-boom-boom.
Bummity-bum-boom-ba-bum!

VICTOR

Throw in a treble that skitter-scatters over the time.

YOUNG VICTOR

How can you forget me?
Scrat-tittle-tee-tat.
You want to be a loser going
Quitty-quitty-quitty?

VICTOR

Bang out a tune that doesn't have a tradition,
Coloring or artistry or exposition!
I'm in deep ditty doo-wah,
And I'm thinking that I like it fine.

OLD VICTOR AND
YOUNG VICTOR

Not a whit?
Not a bit?
Da-da-da-doo-wah!
Deep ditty doo-wah!

VICTOR

Scales are only needful for the lesser crowd.
Practice limits all innovation.

OLD VICTOR

Preach on!

VICTOR

Randomness can conquer any plotted sound.
Structure fails elation, sends it on vacation.
The purest operation is chromatic masturbation.
Disregarding measure is the only way to pleasure.
Murdering the staffing gets your ego up and laughing
And ready to dine on desolation.

YOUNG VICTOR

No! No! No!
No-no-no!
(Wailing.)
Nah-nah-no!

VICTOR

Bye-bye, Masters! None of you have ever had a clue!

YOUNG VICTOR

(Pleading.) They had their troubles, but *they* persevered.

VICTOR

You and your sermons! The Brotherhood of Music is through!

OLD VICTOR

You're right to forget them. Anyway, Cristobal was queer.

VICTOR

I'm denying that I ever put any love in
The study of your scoring!

OLD VICTOR AND
YOUNG VICTOR

Bah! Bah!
Bah! Bah!

Do you hear me Beethoven?
I'm in deep ditty doo-wah
And aborting any homage
You assortment of liars are due!

Deep ditty
Doo-doo-doo
Doo-doo-doo-doo
Deep ditty doo-wah!

VICTOR

The circle of fifths has drawn the last of my blood.

YOUNG VICTOR

Pain is progress and it keeps you looking sharp.

OLD VICTOR

Too bad we took the pain to heart.

VICTOR

I'm ripping out the keys and the bars willy-nilly,
So farewell to the West, the harmonically blessed,
The majors and the minors that were senseless at best!
They played me. They betrayed me. I deserve my final rest!

OLD VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

Deep ditty. Deep ditty doo-wah!

VICTOR

Giving up on giving out for gavelings of gravelings. (Pronounced: grave-uh-lings)

OLD VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

Deep ditty. Deep ditty doo-wah!

VICTOR

Crucifying clarity and creeping to cacophony.

(VICTOR and OLD VICTOR link arms and turn on YOUNG VICTOR.)

VICTOR AND OLD VICTOR

Hope is for a prodigy
And what we are is plod-igy,
An atrophying talent
That nobody wants to nurture.
We can't seem to free
The me we want to be.
We have to cut the losses,
And lose those heavy-headed bosses
Judging from history.

YOUNG VICTOR

There's still time.

There's always time.

Just give it time!

Why can't you wait?

Please! Please! Please!

(YOUNG VICTOR rushes at the other selves. OLD VICTOR leaves his link with VICTOR and blocks the attack with a slight push that sends YOUNG VICTOR, powerless in this moment, sprawling.)

VICTOR

I'm in deep ditty doo-wah,
Deep ditty doo-wah,
Humming on a hominem. Hm.

(VICTOR holds his hum in the best organum style. OLD VICTOR gestures US and a musical score appears – a jumble of measures from a Chopin polonaise. YOUNG VICTOR reaches out to the notes with reverence as OLD VICTOR sneers. VICTOR stares US as strains of music jangle at him desperately, pleading for life. YOUNG VICTOR turns from the score and reaches out to VICTOR. The middle self deliberates for a beat but finally drops his humming and turns his back on the score)

and YOUNG VICTOR.)

Get thee behind me!

(The score winks out immediately. YOUNG VICTOR screams.)

VICTOR AND OLD VICTOR

Deep deep ditty doo-wah!
Doo-wah! Doo-wah!
Do what you have to do!

(Blackout. A projection of a beautiful autumn townscape rises slowly US. A man and a woman, very much in love, are barely visible in the background. As the song progresses, the picture decomposes violently into a shapeless grey. OLD VICTOR enters.)

SONG: KISS OFF

OLD VICTOR

The day we met was amber gold we set
Around the heat of our explored romance
So passion might become a jewel yet
Despite the fights and brief respites; no chance
Or any quarter given while you worked
Your alchemy behind your frozen eyes,
I never knew you stole that day. You smirked,
Aglow with triumph, slyly poised to prize.

(YOUNG VICTOR enters, dancing with a dressmaker's dummy. It should be draped in a silk evening dress. YOUNG VICTOR occasionally wraps the loose fabric around his arms or nuzzles it with his cheek; he

thrills at the sensation of the texture.)

Lorna, Lori, Lora, Lili . . .

How the pet names seem so silly now that you've been gone.

Darling, honey, babe were honest when I said

Them at your side when you were my bride

And we were together in every way.

You were perfect, not a surface out of place,

But surface was all you were, dear,

And I couldn't help drawing near, dear,

Trying to see beneath. You have to believe me.

You were all I wanted – marriage I could do.

Why couldn't you?

(YOUNG VICTOR kisses the dummy on the top of its head and then he exits, wheeling his dancing partner ahead of him.)

A fast December generation passed

And children came although you kept

The first we made: that meeting time, that last

Affair when all the senseless anger slept.

(VICTOR enters with a push- broom. He begins to dance with it, but then he remembers his dignity and begins to sweep the floor rhythmically. Eventually, he forgets his reservations and does lead with the broom, often "riding" its large, bristled head.)

I dreamed of the woman I would marry

And knew that she was you at once

Even though you weren't exactly

How I'd seen her. I worked hard for you,

My moment of proving, and you were disapproving.

You took everything. Everything.

Out of two came one, and when you broke with me

I was a fourth of one, or less. The piece that is depressed.

How squeezed I felt with all your will arrayed –
Discarded, drained of why our game was played.

(VICTOR exits, scooting along on the push-broom.)

I tried to break from you on my terms,
And never could manage the feat
Of finding one to take your place – surpass you,
So I pursued more than one in fruitless folly.
Now you're dead of heart-attack. Appropriate.
And I can let you go with words I should have said before,
So tender and right and enough: "Kiss off!"

(Blackout. Lights rise on OLD VICTOR, who addresses the audience. He is highly nostalgic, both resenting and, deep within, revering the musical life he abandoned.)

SONG: MY GOOD DEAD FRIENDS

OLD VICTOR

Sitting on laurels is fine
When you have them for cushions.
Plenty of people have rested
Contentedly, repeatedly on layers of the past.
It's the only ground that lasts.

(YOUNG VICTOR enters carrying a large blue book cradled in his arms. He faces the audience excitedly.)

YOUNG VICTOR

Here on my sixteenth birthday, I've given myself a gift —
The fanciest book in the public library:
A History of Western Music by Grout.
Never doubt it's amazing. How fabulous to have the Grout.

It sounds like a disease, and that pleases me immensely.
I like being sick, you know, and that's the only time your
Parents really leave you alone for real.

(YOUNG VICTOR sits down cross-legged
on the floor. He opens the book and props
its covers on his knees. He sniffs
the book lovingly and then begins to turn the
pages. He forgets the audience, but OLD
VICTOR continues to speak to its
members.)

OLD VICTOR

Grout showed me scales and told me travails of the Masters.

YOUNG VICTOR

Diatonic, chromatic, enharmonic genera of tetrachords.
Mind the echoes in the octaves, musical stretchings
From old Grecian start to first-finish Flemish.

OLD VICTOR

Hours after hours on end, how I soaked in the names
Of the famous theoreticians and musicians
Until they became more than names.

YOUNG VICTOR

Magic names.

OLD VICTOR

More than names.

YOUNG VICTOR

Star-blooded names with the strain of genius beneath them.
Saying them is playing in their opuses and choruses.

OLD VICTOR

Say them, Victor. Say the names.
Show again how they became what they became.

YOUNG VICTOR

Pythagorus and Quintilianus, Aristotle and Ptolemy,
Boethius and Augustine. Come to me! Come to me!
Gregory the Psalmist, Hildegard and Adam de la Halle.
Come Léonin and Beethoven! Puccini and Landini!
Come all! Be lauded! Come one and all!

(VICTOR enters and exits at random with
busts of the composers. These may be large
or small. VICTOR holds the statues with
varying degrees of respect, demonstrating
the most care with the Medieval and
Renaissance composers.)

OLD VICTOR

My good dead friends.
They never maltreated me.
My good dead friends
With the music in their vowels.

YOUNG VICTOR

Cristobol and Philippe de Vitry.

OLD VICTOR

Such good dead friends, though musty and ancient
With dusts of neglect never showed regret for their lives.

YOUNG VICTOR

Gluck, Schütz, and Wagner.
Palestrina, Monteverdi, Rameau, and Haydn.

(VICTOR stops entering.)

OLD VICTOR

Abiding their time again
In such sweet refrains.

OLD VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

My dead friends. My wonderfully dead good friends.
Lost in time, rhythm and rhyme,
Trying rebirth through notes on the page --
All the sages. Ever ageless.

OLD VICTOR

I made them my study for the sake of fraternity.
Nothing by degrees. Couldn't stand degrees.
Wouldn't take degrees of any type.

YOUNG VICTOR AND OLD VICTOR

My dead friends.
Stupendously, resoundingly, shockingly dead
But alive at my side.
Tomb-cold, worm-bitten, hollowed and juiceless
They reside in my tongue and my throat.
Every note I can sound is for them.
My dead friends.

YOUNG VICTOR

Colonna. Claudel. Offenbach. Strauss.

OLD VICTOR

My dead friends.

YOUNG VICTOR

Humperdinck. Lizt. Chopin and Mahler.

OLD VICTOR

My dead friends.

YOUNG VICTOR

Arcadelt. Jehan des Murs.

OLD VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

My dead friends. Glorious expirees.
My dead friends. Permanent retirees.
All dead. All gone. All dead. All gone.
All dead. All gone. All dead and gone.

(VICTOR erupts onstage and drives away
his other selves.)

VICTOR

Let them die. End the song.
It's gone on too long. Just like me.

(VICTOR exits, sustaining his "me" with an
echoing falsetto. Blackout. YOUNG
VICTOR enters at a brisk trot, a spotlight
framing him. He's wearing tap-shoes, so he

clicks as he walks. A vamp begins during which he tries out a few steps as warm-ups, and the stage brightens fully. He turns out.)

SONG: WHAT'S THE USE?

YOUNG VICTOR

What's the use of being young and alive
When nobody gives you respect?
What's the use of having license to drive
When you don't have places to go yet?

Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, and twenty,
All that they give you is boo-coo plenty
Of reasons for suicide (some of which I've tried)
What's the . . . ? What's the . . . ? What's the use?

What's the use of having hormones roaring
When you have to tame them to set?
What's the use of knowing learning is boring
When you have so much schooling to do yet?

Twenty-one, twenty, nineteen, and eighteen.
Every year is filled with so much goddamn waiting!
Then your majority has no authority.
What's the . . . ? What's the . . . ? What's the use?

(YOUNG VICTOR begins to tap-dance as the music swells into an instrumental riff. Throughout the dance, VICTOR and OLD VICTOR enter and exit bearing signs with grotesque renderings of the words "Daddy", "Girls", "Expectations", and "College." They wave whatever sign is being carried in front of YOUNG VICTOR before exiting. This waving should be pointed and menacing. When YOUNG VICTOR sees a sign, he stops cold. He finds it more and

more difficult to resume his dance. Finally, he abandons it completely. VICTOR and OLD VICTOR cease entering/exiting at this point.)

What's the use of having talent?
 What's the use of being bright?
 What's the use of being balanced?
 What's the use of having foresight?
 What's the use of being me?
 There's no purpose I can see.

I don't mind being juvenile,
 But I'm baffled by the need.
 It's not fair I should have limits now,
 To be granted the "be" but denied the "how"!
 Wuh-wuh-wuh-wuh-wuh-wuh-wuh!
 What's the use? What's the use?
 Somebody quell my misery! What's the use?

(YOUNG VICTOR treats the audience to a juicy raspberry as he back-shuffles offstage. Blackout. A boxing ring is projected US. VICTOR's pre-recorded voice announces: "Let's get ready to crumble!" A ding sounds. Lights rise and VICTOR, OLD VICTOR, and YOUNG VICTOR enter wearing boxing attire, but they aren't sporting headgear or shirts. They spar with each other.)

SONG: WREAKAGE

YOUNG VICTOR

Let me take control. I have the soul.
 I have the innocence. I'm ready to excel.
 I'm brilliant. I'm super.

OLD VICTOR

I'm super. You're the id,
As in the *idiot* who has the dreams
But not the scope or the experience.
You're better off behind me.

(VICTOR rescues YOUNG VICTOR by
attacking OLD VICTOR.)

VICTOR

All you've ever done is fool us into thinking that the books
We've read are all we need to finally succeed
When all they've ever given us are useless things to know.
Who cares about vocabulary? It's like inner constabulary.
We've all been policed so much there's nothing left to save.

OLD VICTOR

And yet you used "constabulary."

VICTOR

Like I have a choice.

YOUNG VICTOR

The books became our voice.

ALL

You don't deserve to push the flesh.
The mind we need's not second-best.
Get out of here before you kill us!

(The sparring becomes more intense. The
three fighters land some solid blows below
the belt, but they never attack the chest or

head. There is a ding. VICTOR and YOUNG VICTOR stagger away to nurse their wounds. OLD VICTOR remains vital, bouncing on his toes. He crosses to VICTOR and listens as the middle self exposes his troubles.)

VICTOR

Therapy! I must have therapy!
 I've finally gone bonky.
 The world has gone all wonky!
 Balance! I must have balance!
 And a drink. Make that a pitcher.
 Anything to cancel out the richness of my mind.

(OLD VICTOR circles VICTOR, coaching him.)

OLD VICTOR

Listen to the baby crying for the milk of human kindness.
 I would be sympathetic if it all weren't so damn mindless.
 What's the matter, Victor? Things didn't go as planned?
 The younger people crowd you out? They don't think you're a man?
 Well, let me tell you that they're right. They are!
 Get that tonnage on the mat. Throw the weight and not the towel.
 Show me that they can't be right. Fight, Victor! Fight!

(A ding sounds. OLD VICTOR retreats near-offstage. VICTOR and YOUNG VICTOR engage, and VICTOR, maddened, nearly pounds the younger self into pulp. A distorted ding sounds and the two retreat. OLD VICTOR moves over to YOUNG VICTOR.)

YOUNG VICTOR

How can they keep hiding me? I'm tired of my prison.
 I have such potential beyond their cold derision.
 Optimism! Optimism! Optimism! Optimism!
 What we need is my emotion and a little healthy ignorance.
 That's the way to overcome this indigence.
 Cripes! Those books again!

(OLD VICTOR hangs a friendly arm around
 YOUNG VICTOR's neck and proceeds to
 counsel the young man.)

OLD VICTOR

I know you fear authority, but don't let it overwhelm you.
 Older seems much safer and respected, but it's all illusion
 That the fat-cats with the padding of the years want you to buy.
 Why? To make you doubt. Why? To make you stop.
 Go out there and swing into the midriff till you drop!
 Rebel, my boy. Rebel! Go out and give them Hell!

(A ding sounds. VICTOR and YOUNG
 VICTOR engage once more, but this time
 YOUNG VICTOR has the upper hand. He
 pummels VICTOR without mercy. OLD
 VICTOR laughs, and YOUNG VICTOR
 stops. VICTOR and YOUNG VICTOR
 look at OLD VICTOR with suspicion.)

YOUNG VICTOR

You self-deceiving goat!

VICTOR

You had us at our throats!

(They cross to OLD VICTOR with murder glinting in their eyes. OLD VICTOR backpedals around the stage, but the other selves follow him.)

OLD VICTOR

Now, boys, my deep agenda wasn't meant to cause offense.
You know I'm the best qualified to lead. In my defense,
I know so much more than the both of you combined
About reality and pragmatism and the inner mind.
It's Darwin for the psyche. That's all that it is.
Survival of the fittest, and that's me!

VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

Oh, really?

(Four dings sound. The selves run at each other and swing, but their arms lock into a circle. They struggle to break free, spinning the circle around several times in the attempt.)

VICTOR

Give me breathing room!

OLD VICTOR

Stop wishing!

YOUNG VICTOR

Shout louder! Live braver!

VICTOR

Shut up!

OLD VICTOR

Shut up!

YOUNG VICTOR

You shut up!

ALL (In a round.)

I know what's best! I know what's best!
I know what's best! I know what's best.

(Another ding sounds, but this one is heavy and full – the knell of doom. The selves break apart and swing. They connect with each other's chins simultaneously and subsequently drop to the floor. "K.O." is projected US as VICTOR's prerecorded voice thunders: "Breakdown." Blackout. Lights rise to reveal a bare stage. OLD VICTOR enters dressed in a morning robe. He carries a folding chair and crosses DS. He unfolds the chair and sits in it. Lights dim until he is bound by a cone of light.)

SONG: STASIS KING

OLD VICTOR

Immobility. Stuck in place.
I'm the yellow signal for the human race.

Look at a sloth, and you'll be seeing me.
I'm always hitting the snooze to stay in reverie,
And when I finally muster, I go find a chair,
Turn on the boob-tube and vacantly stare
At particles flashing by in red, blue, and green
Assembling places where I've never been,

And sometimes a sitcom brings a friend or two by.
That's when I hit the power and cry.

(Lights rise on SR to reveal VICTOR
frozen in the attitude of *The Thinker*.)

When did my destiny escape so far from me?
I don't remember saying: "Bye."
I started as a go-to, hopeful, willful sort of guy,
The sort of man who won't accept ennui.
I'd like to have potential back, but did I ever have the knack
Of making a bold assertion of my primal needs and wants?
I can only say: "I did not."

(Lights snap to black on VICTOR and rise
SL on YOUNG VICTOR frozen in the
attitude of *David*.)

I'm just a statue in a public park
Where I'm pigeoned by day and graffitied by dark.
The people all stare, but I don't care
Because they're noticing me and being slightly aware
That I'm a person who had important history
And that knowing is such a source of bliss for me.
I'm an emblem they think is maybe a-okay,
But they all move on and here I stay.

(Lights snap to black on YOUNG VICTOR.
Throughout the following verse, the lights
rise and fall swiftly and spontaneously,
alternating SL and SR. VICTOR and
YOUNG VICTOR are revealed in various
statuary attitudes – *Laocoön*, *Motherland*,
Buddha, *Nataraja*, *Lord of the Dance*,
Perseus, and *Orpheus*.)

Reaching a hand, I want contact.
I need feeling. How I want that.
Nobody cares. They don't notice.
They don't realize. They're too focused.

I can appeal, but it's fruitless.
 I'm too idle. It's all bootless.
 Life is a blur to me, vigor and zip.
 No one slows down for a drip.

(Lights out on VICTOR and YOUNG
 VICTOR.)

I'm a stasis king,
 Everything is exceeding my grasp.
 The lifestyle chosen by men by the dozen
 Is just too damn fast.

(Lights up SR to reveal VICTOR posed as
The Statue of Liberty.)

From a stasis king,
 Concentric rings spread out and retreat,
 Made up of matter that's former and latter
 And aching quick on its feet.

(Lights down SR and up SL to show
 YOUNG VICTOR posed as *Mercury*.)

When you're a stasis king,
 All you can bring to the big marathon
 Is a wheezing "hooray" as the men run away
 To the gold, silver, bronze.

(Lights down SL. Lights come up
 immediately CS to frame VICTOR and
 YOUNG VICTOR as *Hercules and Antaeus*.
 Lights fade to black on this image as the
 final verse is sung by OLD VICTOR.)

Behold the stasis king,
 Avoiding the sting of ambitions so tall
 By slowing his pressure to lesser and lesser
 And hardly ever moving at all.

(Blackout. Lights rise to a cheerful but slightly disturbing intensity, featuring orange or yellow highlights. YOUNG VICTOR is DCS, pantomiming asking a girl for a date. He should be very awkward, and the pantomime must include a visible demonstration of his angry dismay when the girl refuses him and walks away. As he sings, the occasional picture of him striking out with other girls may be projected US.)

SONG: I'D RATHER BE GAY

YOUNG VICTOR

"Look out, girls!" is what I'd like to say.
 "Here comes Casanova come to make your day.
 Let's be a little friendly. Hey. Hey. Hey.
 What's a few inches of skin between friends?"
 I'd like to knock their socks off or charm higher up
 And make them feel constricted by their brassiere cups,
 But it's just a mental exercise I like to play.
 All things considered, I'd rather be gay.

It's a seldom-spoken mode of male existence,
 And though I comprehend that it's taboo,
 And rife with scary motions I don't care to try,
 The people it caresses seem so fresh and new
 Whenever they come out for public view.

No more confusion about the other gender.
 I could stay confused about the sex I know.
 No worries where to put the eyes.
 Who cares when it's between the guys
 As long as you can keep your hands above the towel?
 Nah! Even slapping ass could never be a foul!
 I know it's much more complicated,
 But the fantasy keeps me so elated.

Call me Butch and tell the world I'm strange.
 Not a lot of gossip here would have to change.
 I'm sure no one would think me a bit deranged.
 "Look at that Victor. I knew he was a fairy."
 Just watch me sashay around and frighten the jocks
 By telling them I like the heavy hang of their blocks.
 There's such a freedom when you act cliché.
 Seems like a blessing: I'd rather be gay.

I'm already effeminate, slight and small.
 The girls say I'm a sissy, prone to throwing hissy
 Fits of pride when they don't like my compliments.
 Maybe I should try cross-dressing and invest in rich valour,
 Take up Oscar Wilde and drink Perrier, not Coors,
 Wear red Angora sweaters and enjoy the way they frill . . .

I don't have that kind of courage, but I'd like to.
 Could I kiss a man and love him? No. That's strike two.
 I want every speck of frippery and maribou,
 Shalimar and regal, ravishing drag
 Without the burden, the weighty burden
 Of being called a fag.

But I hear the women laugh at me
 Behind their shiny curls,
 And it hurts that I'm no hetero entrée.
 I'm trapped by their breasts and all the rest
 Of the sensuous curves they hide away.
 Why should they have the power
 Hour after hour after agonizing hour
 To keep me wrapped under their sway?
 I wish I could escape for good someday.
 I tell you, brother, one man to another: I'd rather be gay!

(Blackout. A baby cry sounds. Lights rise
 as VICTOR enters holding a swaddled baby
 close. This is his only daughter and his
 eldest child. She is days-old but remarkably
 quiet, and he is captivated by her.)

SONG: YOU THERE, DAUGHTER

VICTOR

She's so small and fragile, not to mention slightly ugly,
 But that's only because she's new. What's my excuse?
 Hard to believe that I'm holding anything so precious
 When all I've ever held before is ashes, dust, and leavings;
 Endings, not proceedings, never moving on.

But part of me has moved, at least.
 X-Y I've filled the primal need to procreate.
 Late. Isn't it great?

You there, daughter, with your thumb up your nose.
 Lamb to slaughter? God only knows.
 You surprised me and your mother, but I recovered faster.
 She may have borne you, she may love and mourn you,
 But I'll see you through disaster.
 That's what mastering fatherhood's about. You'll see.

(VICTOR continues looking at his daughter.
 OLD VICTOR enters, holding a picture in a
 frame. It is a professional portrait of his girl,
 now middle-aged and estranged from him.
 Lights fade slightly on VICTOR. OLD
 VICTOR addresses the picture.)

OLD VICTOR

Forty years old, and still you're small.
 Bounded deep inside four wooden walls,
 You've boxed yourself back into my hands.
 Tax attorney, mother of three,
 See how you return to my hands.
 If only you'd come back to my life.
 Don't shun me like your brothers,
 Ashamed that I'm no patriarch.
 I know your mother hates me and fills you with her rage,

But realize that while she may be your mother,
 She was never your wife.
 You don't side with me,
 But I've never turned away from you.

You there, daughter, looking ever so smart.
 College degrees, chateaus by the seas, and missing a heart.
 I held your trike and your bike to teach you to move,
 And, oh, how you moved away as soon as you could say "goodbye."
 My, my, my. My daughter. I may embarrass
 And be slightly careless with holidays, and birthdays, and weekends.
 Alright, all days. Still, I remember you when I'm quiet.
 I always remember you.

(The profile-in-silhouette of a grown woman
 is projected US. Lights rise on VICTOR
 until they are equalized with
 the lights on OLD VICTOR. VICTOR and
 OLD VICTOR quarter-turn to the
 projection.)

VICTOR

OLD VICTOR

Will you be pretty?

You grew up so well.

Will you succeed?

Nobody could be prouder.

Will you be witty?

Sharp as a cleaver.

What will you need?

Will you ever need me?

I know you love me.

Why don't you want to be with me?

We'll always connect.

Why won't you call?

VICTOR AND OLD VICTOR

You there, daughter. You're my all.

VICTOR

You there, daughter.
Be my daughter.
Don't be taken in
By those who say
I'm unimportant.
I'm more than
Just a schmoe.
I'm real for you.
Be there for me.

OLD VICTOR

You there, daughter,
Aren't we the twosome?
You doing things that matter,
Me failed and gruesome,
But we remain a bond of genes
Though you may think it obscene
To the extreme.
Since I first held you,
I knew you were part of me.

VICTOR

New daughter.

OLD VICTOR

Grown daughter.

VICTOR

Don't let me be *my* father.

OLD VICTOR

Let me be yours.

(The projection fades. Blackout. OLD VICTOR enters as the lights rise. He is contemplative. After a beat, he turns to the audience.)

SONG: MY APOLOGY

OLD VICTOR

The only problem with living alone
 Is that you have to live with yourself.
 It's not just a matter of cleaning,
 Sleeping, eating, and drinking. That's routine.
 It's how you handle who you are behind your eyelids that matters,
 And how you make amends for who you were.

(YOUNG VICTOR enters.)

Look at this youngster. A sprig.
 This rakish young knave with
 An honest-to-God glint in his eye.
 He was too shy around girls. He never exercised.
 His body was sad. Books were his meaning.
 He never had his weaning, so he never became old.
 Instead he grew wise and rotten inside his hand-me-down genes.
 I've never forgotten that. You have my apology, Victor.
 I'll always be sorry for letting you wither, not bloom.

(VICTOR enters.)

Then take this oaf. Take this embarrassment
 Who suffered harassment busy being the butt
 The world always sat on. He was intelligent,
 Maybe a genius; could have kept scholarships
 To a conservatory, but, *a priori*,
 He had to perform. He couldn't perform.
 He was too scared of his past failures.
 Couldn't perform on the stage,
 At the office, in bed with his wife . . .
 He muddled his life, and I'm sorry, Victor.
 Yes, we're both sorry to the extreme.

VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

Who do we blame for our failure?

OLD VICTOR

You blame me.

VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

Who made us small and insignificant?

OLD VICTOR

I bear that shame. Oh, the shame.

VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

Selves of the past never let you relax.
They're always pointing their fingers.
"What if?" and "How come?" and "Why did I?"
Always will linger, malinger.

OLD VICTOR

Those questions when humanized
Become dead-ringers for me.

My apology to me. My apology to me.
Who I am. Who I was. Who I was meant to be.
Time has been wasted and I have been basted in hot chronol flux.
My one conclusion to all my confusion is: "My life sucks!"

VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

Always has. Always will. Swallow that bitter pill.

OLD VICTOR

My apology to me.
 My apology to me.
 I cannot phrase it
 Properly with feeling.
 My apology to me.
 My apology to me.
 All I can think of
 Is how I have been
 Deceiving and double-dealing.
 Where is my language?
 I'm stricken draconian.
 Can't even hum an Aeolian scale.
 Contrition is reduced to staleness
 Then nothing.

VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

We don't accept your sadness.

We don't accept it!

We declare independence
 Of your fences and suspenses.

Liar! You've only hurt yourself!

We take your verbs.
 We take your nouns.
 Nominative, dative, genitive,
 Especially accusative!
 Banish accusative!
 Gone with accusative!

(OLD VICTOR is stricken dumb. He sits
 down, overcome.)

YOUNG VICTOR

That's no apology.

VICTOR

Guilt's no apology.

VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

You saw us through our lives.
 So what if we didn't thrive.
 At least we survived.

VICTOR

You want to be shrived for that?

YOUNG VICTOR

You want shrives with that?

VICTOR AND YOUNG VICTOR

If that's what you need, we forgive you.

(YOUNG VICTOR and VICTOR lift OLD VICTOR onto his feet. They each grab one of his arms.)

ALL

Our apology. Our apology.
One apology. His apology.
No apology is needed.
We're human and flawed. So what?

(A pastoral scene is projected US. The selves walk towards it. Blackout.)

END OF ACT I

END OF PLAY

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